Representations of Muslim Women in Contemporary British Theatre

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I certify that all material in this thesis which is not my own work has been identified and that no material has previously been submitted and approved for the award of a degree by this or any other University.

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Abstract

This PhD thesis sets out to study how Muslim women have been depicted in contemporary British plays. I am studying these depictions in eight plays:

1. *Deadeye* by Amber Lone, first performed in October 2006 at The Door, Birmingham Repertory Theatre.
2. *Sweet Cider* by Emteaz Hussain, London 2008.
3. *Shades* by Alia Bano, London 2009.
4. *What Fatima Did* by Atiha Sen Gupta, London 2009.
5. *Sisters* by Stephanie Street, Sheffield 2010.
6. *Burq Off!* by Nadia Manzoor, London 2014.
7. *My Name Is...* by Sudha Bhuchar, London 2014
8. *East Is East* by Ayub Khan-Din, London 2014.

I am arguing in my introduction that there is an emerging theory within feminism that I am calling Islamic feminisms, and I am using it as a framework for my analysis of the plays in the thesis. Islamic feminisms draw on, and are influenced by questions of cultural hybridity, second wave Western feminism, and religious ideology.

Three key issues emerge from study of the plays: the question of the hijab, the position of women within the Muslim family, and the integration/non-integration of Muslim women in British society. Each chapter develops an extended study of one of these key issues, including a literature review of the social, political, religious, or cultural backgrounds of the issue, and then goes on to analyse a selected number of plays where these issues are either the main or one of the main topics. The analyses look at the play as a cultural event, examining the circumstances surrounding the writing and producing of each play and assessing the possible contribution that the play has made to contemporary debates about these issues. I analyse not just thematic content, but also the ways in which performativity has conveyed messages and initiated or invited dialogues about the issues.

My analysis develops an evaluation of the significance of these plays to the cultural debate in the UK around these key issues, and reflects on the contribution of these plays and the development of Muslim feminist plays in the future.

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Acknowledgments

As if doing a PhD is not difficult enough, especially when it is being done in one's second language, a lot of circumstances, all of which are direct or indirect results of the war in my country, came together to make my PhD nearly impossible. Luckily, the support of the wonderful people in my life has matched and conquered the tough circumstances and life's unpleasant surprises.

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For Najwa's legacy, Sam's future, and for Maisaa's unconditional love and kindness , I dedicate this thesis.

Introduction

The Motivations

My interest in feminism started at a young age, without really knowing that what I was interested in was feminism. Back in Syria, where I come from, boys and girls are segregated into different schools from the age of twelve until the end of high school, and they mix again at university. During those six years as a teenager, I was reminded that relationships with girls were taboo, or at least it was too early (according to my father the right time to start having a relationship was after graduating from university!). I have always been interested in, and confused about, how gender roles are assigned and acted out in my society. These roles were incomprehensible for me; I enjoyed the fact that I was free to stay outside until late at night, but never understood why my sisters were not, and I certainly enjoyed the fact that my brother and I were not expected to do any chores inside the house, but it was our duty to do chores outside the house. Why, being a respectful young man, was there nothing wrong with me wanting to have a girlfriend, but at the same time the mere idea of my sister being someone else's girlfriend sounded too bad to even think about? The thing that most confused and annoyed me was that not all the females I knew rejected those roles and rules. In fact, it seemed to me that only a minority rejected them and rebelled against them, while the majority seemed to enjoy playing those roles and did not need to be policed by their parents or anyone else to carry out their expected duties and maintain and guard the borderlines between male and female. When I started my undergraduate degree in English at Tishreen University in Lattakia, I learned about feminism, and that was when I started finding answers to my questions and confusions, and also that was the time I realised that I was actually a feminist. I realise now how the word 'feminist' could mean different things to different people, and sometimes it could have opposing and clashing interpretations, but for me the meaning of being a feminist has always been clear. A feminist for me means someone who

notices, critiques, rejects and tries to subvert the unnatural and illogical gender roles that are imposed by patriarchal societies on men and women alike with harmful and crippling outcomes for both genders, although these outcomes are felt much more directly and painfully by women.

This was the first motivation for me to do this PhD, and the second one was the question of identity and belonging. Syria is considered an Arab nation, but this is a description that has a lot of ethnic and historical inaccuracies, and it also does not reflect fairly the ethnic components of the Syrian society right now. Firstly, 9-10% of Syrians are Kurds, and a further 2-3% are Assyrians (Syriacs), Arameans (the two original ethnic components of Syria) and Armenians, Circussians, Syrian Turkmens, and Greek (the migrant ethnic minorities in Syria). What is more, even the majority who are considered Arabs have only started identifying themselves in recent history. Arabic was introduced to Syria in the mid 7th century with the Arab-Muslim conquest, and consequently became the official language of the land under the Omayyad rule and all the other Muslim empires and kingdoms that ruled Syria since then. The concept of an Arab nationality started crystallising in Syria, Iraq and Egypt in the second half of the nineteenth century as it became a rallying point in the fight against the increasing dictatorship and oppression practiced by the Ottoman rulers. It was only under the military dictatorships that ruled the Arabic-speaking nations after the end of Western occupation in mid-twentieth century that Arab identity became the unquestionable and official identity of the 22 nations that make the Arab League. Under these dictatorships, the original languages and cultures that existed pre-Islam have been marginalised and sometimes oppressed. As a Syrian, I have been taught next to nothing about the Phoenician, Canaanite, and Assyrian histories and cultures at school, but I received thorough and exhaustive teaching about Islamic history and the history of all of the 22 Arab nations post the Arab-Islamic conquest. Ask an average Syrian student at school now about pre-Islamic Syria and, depending on their school books, they will not be able to tell you anything other than: Syria is 6000 years old, we invented the alphabet and glass, we had a female queen, and Damascus is the oldest inhabited capital in the world. We are taught these fragments of history in order to be proud, but we know nothing about the languages, the religions, the cultures of pre-Islamic Syria. These things do not disappear though, and their residue is still present and clear. For example, the dance, music, and food of Syrians, Lebanese, Palestinians, Kurds, Greeks, and Cypriots are

very similar, but there is hardly anything in common in those three categories with any of the gulf nations.

These differences are at odds with the persistent assertions by successive Baath party governments that ruled Syria since 1963. Since the 1960s, any doubt cast on the leadership's intentions, the methods of dealing with Israel over the Golan Heights, or questioning of the Arab identity of Syria has been met with ruthless crack down, and the perpetrators of such criticisms have been considered traitors. The result was that decades ago, Arab identity became unquestionable and the Syrian people became so hegemonized in this regard that we look down at any other identity marker, social practice, or tradition that does not conform to conventional Arab characteristics. Many Syrians, like myself, have struggled to really live and celebrate our Arab identity in order to be good and patriotic citizens who do and say the right thing. The reason we struggled was that the markers of this identity were very different to the cultural markers of who we feel we really are as Syrians, especially in the big cities like Damascus and Aleppo, and the Mediterranean cities like Lattakia and its countryside. It is particularly difficult, challenging, and even confusing to walk the lines between Syrian and Arab identities for the Syrian females, even in these areas that are relatively more liberal than the rest of Syria, and significantly more liberal than core Arab societies like those of Saudi Arabia and the other gulf countries. Historically and traditionally, social mixing between the genders and the public presence of women have never been taboos in Syria. It is normal for women to occupy high positions in the government, and until the civil war started in 2011, Syria had had the highest representation of women in parliament among the Arab League countries. Syrian society considers itself more civilised and modern in outlook in comparison with other Arab nations, based on the position of women in our society. However, this pride in being more modern and liberal in our attitude towards women is superficial, for two reasons: first, family laws in Syria are only marginally more supportive of women than the laws of other Arab League countries, so even though a Syrian woman seems to have more social freedoms than a Saudi woman, a Syrian husband has almost as much legal protection as a Saudi husband if he decides to limit his wife's freedoms and rights. Secondly, the smaller circles of community and family can and do often utilise the notion of the proper code of conduct in accordance with Arab and Eastern values whenever they feel that their wives, sisters, or daughters have crossed a line in their behaviour. In other words, a Syrian woman

could go through all her life as an independent person with agency and full control of her life, but she could also discover at any moment how fragile her relatively privileged circumstances could be. Identity for a Syrian woman can be a source of pride and comfort, and it can very easily and simultaneously be a reminder that she needs to be careful with her freedoms and rights and how she uses them.

The issue of identity and belonging for the Syrian woman and how she lives in two worlds that exist in the same place and time, is a topic that has always intrigued me. I have always wanted to research the components of the Syrian identity and how they work together, or against each other, and why certain components are much more accentuated than others, especially in relation to Syrian women. For political and logistic reasons though, it is impossible for me to do this research now. However, while I was writing my Masters dissertation on the representation of Arabs in contemporary British theatre here at Exeter University's drama department, I came across a number of plays that depict the lives of female British Muslim characters. I started to notice a pattern in these plays that they all raise and deal with the question of identity for female British Muslims. I started seeing more and more similarities between the ways in which a Syrian woman feels torn between the liberal and conservative values of the different cultures that come together to create a Syrian identity, and the ways in which British Muslims, British Muslim women in particular, also inhabit the worlds of conservative Islam and the conservative cultures of Pakistan, India, or Iraq, and the world of liberal Britain, as far as feminism and sexuality. There are, of course, multiple differences between the two societies and the two contextual situations I am referring to, but many concepts are shared: where do I belong when I live in a society that has major contradictions within it? do I need to take side, or shall I- can I- accept the contradictions, embrace them and use them to my own good? Another concept that is similar across the two contexts is the question of representation. In Syria, you can find those who insist on classifying and representing the Syrian woman as a conservative Arab, and will consider it shameful and immoral to shed that identity. There are also those who will consider a Syrian woman who embraces the conservative values of Arab culture as backward and regressive. In Britain too, a Muslim woman finds herself the material subject of much rhetoric as conservative Muslims would insist on identity markers, like hijab for example, to assert that a Muslim woman is different from, and even morally superior to other women. On the other hand, there are

feminists who insist that hijab is a form of oppression that cannot be tolerated in a liberal society. The plays I am studying in this thesis depict these issues, and they also depict the experiences of characters that do not always identify with one rhetoric or another, but that are depicted as balancing their self-identity as female and as Muslim. Studying the identity issue for British Muslim women as portrayed by contemporary British plays is, therefore, the closest I could come, for now, to understanding something about the identity issue for Syrian women.

Why British? Why Muslim? Why Theatre?

As I mentioned earlier, one of the reasons why I started this research was that I came across a number of interesting British plays, but I was still open to the possibility of studying other Western representations of Muslim women in other forms of performance and representation than theatre. The decision to focus on the UK was a matter of scale, because with each issue I am going to look at I will first talk about the social, political, religious, and cultural backgrounds before I analyse the plays and how they deal with the issues. The social, political, and cultural contexts are very different between the UK and the USA, for example and I decided early in my PhD journey that it would be too broad to study both the American and British experience of Muslim communities and their depiction in plays. Initially, I noticed many similarities between traditional South-Asian communities, regardless of religion, and traditional Muslim communities, and I considered looking at the representation of British South Asian women in theatre. It seemed to me that the manifestation of patriarchy and the circumstances that determine those forms and levels of patriarchy that are dominant in British South-Asian communities are very similar to those of the British Muslim communities (who are actually mostly South-Asian). However, to provide a really nuanced analysis of the position and the representation of a group of women I could not consider only the apparent manifestations of the issue, but I have had to identify the roots of these issues, namely the religious backgrounds. It became clear for me then that I needed to focus on the Muslim community in particular in order to provide a subtle analysis of position and representation of the women of this minority group. Moreover, it makes sense that I should utilise my deep knowledge of Islam in this research. I was born and raised in a Muslim family in a two Muslim communities. I was born in Saudi Arabia and my family moved back to Syria when I was seven, and I lived there until the age of 26 when I came to study in the UK. I was also deeply religious and a devout Muslim who practiced Islam with commitment and passion until the age of 25.

As I read and watched plays with main characters who were female Muslims, I noticed that most of these plays are verbatim, autobiographical, based on personal stories, or a result of new-writers' workshops, and I felt there was a real desire to represent Muslim women's

experience by women behind these plays. Moreover, theatre interacts with the community and starts dialogues. It is very easy to switch the channel when you are watching television or listening to radio while audience members engage more fully with performances they choose to watch and are less inclined to leave. Moreover, unlike most other forms of performance, those who take part in the making of a play know that there is the opportunity for direct criticism and commentary, particularly when the play is about a sensitive subject.. I will point out in my analysis of these plays the ways in which the writers or companies made clear their intention to debate and discuss significant issues.

Representation and self-representation

All of the plays I will study in this thesis are written by British playwrights from South-Asian backgrounds. The majority of Muslims in the UK are from South-Asian backgrounds, with more than half from Pakistani background.[1] While this dissertation's core focus is on the representations of female Muslim characters, a significant context to the work is the genesis of British South-Asian theatre. South-Asian theatre started emerging in the UK in the 1970s as South-Asian migrants settled in the 1960s and 1970s. South-Asian communities in the UK were subject to unwelcome attention from different racist and fascist groups like the National Front and racist elements from the Skinhead movement. In fact, the foundation of the very first South-Asian theatre company in the UK, Tara Arts, in 1977 was triggered out by the murder of a young Sikh man in Southall, London in 1976 by white racists. (Hingorani 2010: 14) It was not just racial violence that necessitated the founding of Tara, and other South-Asian theatre companies. Tamasha, founded in 1989, Kali in 1990, and others, were faced with the realisation that British South-Asians were a minority in a strange culture and needed to speak out and be heard, and to assert their cultural presence in British theatre venues. Tara Arts started as 'a community group staging the literature and drama of the Indian subcontinent.' (Godiwala 2006: 102) The fusion of heritage with contemporary concerns forms the main feature of South Asian British theatre in Godiwala's opinion, and she suggests this theatre

[1] I will provide a thorough analysis of the demographics of Muslims in the UK in chapter three.

refused the pre-imposed stigmas and characteristics of traditional Indian theatre, yet at the same time realised the influence it could have on British theatre in general:

> British Asian theatre is constructed through the difference of acculturation as it is modified through intercultural exchange and socialization, avoiding the false representation produced by rigidly antithetical and binary categories which lead to the need for 'authenticity' and 'elitism' that India and England currently seek in their individual and divorced calls for living theatre. (103)

Tara Arts, and the other British Asian Theatre companies that soon followed, wanted to assert their existence as an integral part of British society, yet also sustain their own unique characteristics. Holding on to culture is a common practice of discriminated minorities, and in the first few years of British Asian theatre, cultural resistance and the assertion of identity and culture were the main objective. I was not surprised when I learned that the founding members of Tara Arts 'were not theatrically skilled' and that social and cultural activism, not theatre, was behind their initiative:

> The founding members were themselves young men, most of them studying in higher education, none of them in drama. They were unsure of what form their response [to the racial crime in 1976 mentioned above] should take, but they were looking for cultural expression rather than direct political action. Their main choice eventually fell on theatre-making. They could initiate and steer this themselves, at least at a rudimentary level, and they were convinced of the need to advance the visibility of young Asians in acts of cultural self-representation. (Dadswell and Ley 2011: 13)

The similarities between the emerging South-Asian theatre in the 1970s-1980s and the emerging British Muslim feminist theatre- which is mostly South-Asian- in the last few years are striking. Most of the playwrights I am studying are young female playwrights, and most of the plays I am studying are their first attempts. Focusing on a number of South-Asian productions, Daboo tries to answer the question of 'what happens when theatre usually considered to be on the "margins" is filtered into the "centre", and how this centre is both challenged and revealed in the process.' (Daboo 2012: 154), and I will try to answer the same questions in my analyses in the following chapters, and add to them the question of what does these acts of 'Mixing with the mainstream' and 'transgressing the identity of place' (154) tell us about the margins as well.

In 1985 the Black Theatre Forum[2] was established and it included Caribbean, African and South Asian theatre companies in England. The companies of the three groups of minorities felt the need to organise themselves into an alliance in order to be more influential, to lobby for more financial support from the Art Council and get more facilities and venues to perform and reach audiences beyond their own local communities. Tara Arts was the only British Asian company to join The Black Theatre Forum initially, and participate in the Black Theatre seasons from 1985. Despite the apparent advantages of this collaborative approach, these Black Theatre seasons had only short term benefits, like attracting public funding and mainstream media's interest, but when thinking of development on the long term some practitioners called for 'integrated casts as a sign of the progressive inclusion of the black theatre within the mainstream British culture.' (Terracciano 2006: 31) Terracciano explains further that this demand was 'to oppose the "separate development" of black theatre from the rest of British theatre, if such development was meant as a cultural apartheid rather than as the creation of a space to develop a theatre of research.' (32)

In a paper on Tamasha Theatre Company in *Staging New Britain,* Anne Fuchs analyses the concept of 'Heritage' in Black and Asian British theatre. Fuchs says that heritage could be 'dictated by political pragmatism' and questions the authenticity (and fixity) of heritage and, accordingly, questions the point of art and theatre as heritage. Yet Fuchs tries to explain why minority theatre makers find it vital to explore their heritage: 'they no longer live on ancestral lands and are obliged, and even ambitious, to adapt their way of life to that of the host nation.' (129) So the theatre practitioner's commitment to ideas of heritage from their native land is necessary for the minority in order to reassure themselves that they did not lose their unique identity. This uncertainty about heritage and tradition created unease in the Black Theatre Forum and many feared that British South-Asian theatre companies might discover that 'the pursuit of the preservation of these [traditions], fossilizes them.' (Godiwala 2006: 12)

[2] For detailed chronology of the Black Theatre Forum see: Terracciano, A., 2006. Mainstreaming African Asian and Caribbean Theatre: The Experiments of Black Theatre Forum. In: Godiwala, D. ed. Alternatives within the mainstream. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, pp. 22-60.

Another major issue appeared in relation to the mixing of Asian, African and Caribbean theatres in one category. At the beginning, the idea of unity and cooperation seemed a good solution in the face of difficult circumstances:

> The use of a common "black" banner by artists of African and Asian descent was an act of resistance towards discriminating racial practices within the British system, rather than a way to level differences of histories, traditions and personal aesthetic researches amongst the communities forced together in the multicultural "melting pot." (35)

What seemed right in principle did not really work for a long time in reality, and restlessness with this fusion started to come to the surface. This was clear as early as season three when British Asian theatre companies formed their own Asian Theatre Forum, and it was also attested to among British Asian audiences who decreased substantially throughout the seasons. Understandably, both Asian communities and Asian theatre practitioners in England could not neglect the fact that their culture is so rich that it should stand by itself as a genre within British theatre. Hence, the term Black British theatre ceased to apply to British Asian theatre as well, although British Asian theatre remained present in Black Theatre Seasons. It is important to clarify here that the necessity for British Asian theatre's independence from the general category of Black British theatre was not due to difference as much as to diversity. We should also notice that the term 'British-Asian' theatre that survived for decades is starting to disappear now and being replaced by the term South-Asian.

In his book, *The Location of Culture*, Homi K Bhabha gives a thorough explanation of the crucial distinction between 'cultural difference' and 'cultural diversity':

> If cultural diversity is a category of comparative ethics, aesthetics or ethnology, cultural difference is a process of signification through which statements *of* culture or *on* culture differentiate, discriminate and authorize the production of fields of force, reference, applicability and capacity. Cultural diversity is the recognition of pre-given cultural contents and customs, held in a time-frame of relativism; it gives rise to anodyne liberal notions of multiculturalism, cultural exchange, or the culture of humanity. (Bhabha 1994: 34)

The concept of 'the culture of humanity', according to Bhabha here means to potentially erase difference in the name of multiculturalism, inter-culturalism and liberalism. On the other hand, I am reminded here of Edward Said's idea that terms and concepts like Englishness, Oriental spirit, and African mystery are all constructs and inventions which people are made

to believe in and take for granted (Said 1978). There are then two extremes of either accepting cultural identity markers as absolute facts or ignoring these markers in the name of the 'culture of humanity'. I do believe that culture is not restricted to a nation, a race, an area, or a religion and that cultural identity is created in the interaction and exchange between these elements. I also believe that cultural backgrounds do play important roles in the personal experiences of people.

Bhabha also scrutinizes the concept of 'the right to signify' that is claimed by minority cultures through the authority and power of tradition:

> The social articulation of difference, from the minority's perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of cultural transformation ... The borderline engagements of cultural difference may be as often consensual as conflictual; they may confound our definitions of tradition and modernity; ... and challenge normative expectations of development and progress. (2)

I understand Bhabha's 'cultural hybridity' as a deconstruction of the pre-imposed norms. Traditions can neither be ignored nor accepted but need to be readdressed and put under an 'on-going' scrutiny that does not stop as long as the world, the societies and the people are in a constant state of change and progress.

The lines and quotations above make a framework for exploring the expression of British Muslim women's identity in the plays I am studying in this thesis. These plays are neither about stereotypes about these women, nor are they about some accepted multiculturalist assumptions about them, but are about the processes of cultural difference, and also about the importance of the individual experiences of these women and how these individual experiences are influenced, but not necessarily determined, by the social/political/religious circumstances.

Postcolonial Feminism

When I started my PhD in 2010, I was questioned by my peers 'do we still need to talk about feminism? Haven't we achieved equal rights?' Needless to say, comments like these did not reflect the situation of the feminist movement in 2010, but they did to an extent reflect the

state of popular culture, especially in the film and music industries that were complicit in the 1990s and early 2000s in promoting the idea that Western societies were post-feminist. In the last few years the popular feminist movement has picked up momentum again.

However, the gap between the mainstream Western feminist movement and the postcolonial feminist movement has not been fully resolved. Despite a history full of activism and struggle for civil rights and equality in the West, large groups of women still feel let down by the mainstream Western secular culture including the feminist components of this culture. Those who questioned the need for another PhD on feminism were mostly female, English and American friends, but my Syrian, Egyptian and Nigerian friends were excited and encouraged me when I told them what my PhD was going to be about. While this is only a personal observation, I have found this coincidence symbolic of the gap between mainstream Western, predominantly 'white' feminism, and other, sometimes identified as 'subaltern' feminisms. Postcolonial feminism sheds light on the doubled suffering, doubled marginality and doubled under-representation of the women of the third world, or of women of racial and ethnic minority groups within Western societies. It is twice as hard to be subjected to two kinds of alienation and oppression: the majority's oppression of minorities, and the patriarchal society's oppression of women.

Bell Hooks is one prominent feminist who wrote for black and unrepresented women. Like most black feminists, she refuses the moulding of all women in one category based on gender, and prefers the 'postmodern critiques of essentialism which challenge universality and over-determined identity within mass culture and mass consciousness [which] can open up new possibilities for the construction of self and assertion of agency.' (Hooks 2006: 194) Yet Hooks also warns that postmodernist practice could be exclusionary, and she expresses deep dissatisfaction with the absence of black culture and black discourse in postmodernist discourses:

> The failure to recognize a critical black presence in the culture and in most scholarship and writing on postmodernism compels a black reader, particularly a black female reader, to interrogate her interest in a subject where those who discuss and write about it seem not to know black women exist... or [are] producing art that should be seen, heard, approached with intellectual seriousness. (192)

The point Hooks is making here is that black and white feminists might have a shared goal, which is equality for women, but their experiences are not the same, and there are dangerous consequences to ignoring personal experiences under the pretext of having a universal goal. The majority that has the system set up to work in their favour will inevitably overwhelm the minority if the special characteristics and experiences of the minority were to be ignored and considered irrelevant. One clear manifestation of this idea can be seen in popular culture when Viola Davis was the first black female actress to win the EMMY for outstanding lead actress in a drama series. In her acceptance speech, Davis said 'The only thing that separates women of colour from anyone else is opportunity. You cannot win an EMMYs for roles that are simply not there.'[3]

While Hooks' concern is to bring women who have been marginalised due to race into the centre, Gayatri Spivak's writings focus on nationality and ethnicity more than race. Spivak too is opposed to the concept of the 'universal pain' of women that, although is useful in some ways, yet it also could confirm the marginalisation of women of the so-called third world in the mainstream feminist and cultural discourse in the West. Spivak states that she wants to 'deflect attention from the "poor little rich girl speaking *personal* pain as victim of the *greatest* oppression"-act that multiculturalist capitalism- with its emphasis on individuation and competition- would thrust upon us.' (Spivak 1993: 139) What Spivak wants is to remind everyone of two things: first, the US mould works in the US, the British mould works in the UK, the Indian mould works in India, etc. and secondly, that decolonization did not end the struggle for women in the previously colonised nations. In fact, she argues that in many examples the process of decolonisation (the process and not the concept) worked against the rights of women. Spivak goes as far as claiming that 'Today, here, what I call the "gendered subaltern," especially in decolonised space, has become the name "woman" for me' (140).What Spivak advocates, then, is 'transnational feminism' as the way to properly address the specific issues of the women of different nations, cultures, religions, or ethnicities. It is not universal and it is not abstract, but it pays attention to the specificities of the different situations of women and the contexts of these women's struggles.

[3] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OSpQfvd_zkE

In an article by Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, the two academics discuss examples of why transnational feminism does not always work. They discuss 'the institutional divide between international area studies and American studies' (Grewal and Kaplan 2001: 669) in contemporary studies of sexuality. An interesting point that they make is what they call 'the displacement of the victims of sexualized violence to the Third World' (670) The point here is that mainstream Western academic and feminist circles insist on portraying an image of the West being a haven for female rights and their sexual freedom and agency, as opposed to the Third World which is cast as 'primitive' and tolerant of the oppression of women. Grewal and Kaplan warn that this approach reduces the level of attention that should be paid to the issue of sexual violence in the West, and that it perpetuates polemic and uninformed stereotypes of the issue of sexual violence in other nations and cultures.

Many Muslim women feel unrepresented, unappreciated, misunderstood, patronised, and alienated by mainstream Western liberal feminists, and sometimes neglected altogether. Interestingly enough, those feelings of patronage and alienation are present even when Western feminists believe they are helping and supporting, or 'saving' Muslim women. One piece of art that captures this mood is the Egyptian web-comic super heroine, Qahera[4], who is a hijab-wearing female with super powers. Qahera uses her powers to fight for justice and to protect women, mostly from sexual assault. In one comic, Qahera first fights a Muslim preacher teaching his followers that they need to keep their women in check. After she is finished with him she hears a female speaker. One could infer is a Westerner, and she is lecturing about rescuing Muslim women, provoking Qahera to go and fight her as well. In another comic Qahera fights a group of Femen activists trying to 'save her' from her hijab[5].

Of course, I do not claim that this speaks for all of Muslim women; neither do I intend to undermine all Western feminists' approaches to the issues of Muslim women. This thesis is an attempt to understand why there are gaps between western feminism and the Muslim world, and to think about how these gaps could possibly be bridged through theatrical performance. *Shattering the Stereotypes: Muslim Women Speak Out* is a book that tries to shed the light on the gaps between Western and Muslim feminisms in an attempt to demystify myths, and find some common ground between the two groups. Among the

[4] The name of the character, Qahera, is also how Cairo is pronounced in Arabic.
[5] http://qaherathesuperhero.com/

articles, plays, poems and short stories in this book from Muslim American women, I am interested in the idea of the relationship between Western feminists, professionals and academics, and their colleagues and counterparts who come from Muslim countries. It is revealing to see how even in this kind of relationship between academics and scholars some stereotypes still exist. Professor Minoo Moallem, an academic, journalist and feminist recounts an interview with the *San Francisco Examiner*. 'Having been described in the article as a transnational Muslim feminist, I asked the reporter why she added "Muslim," since during the interview I did not describe myself in those terms. She responded to me by saying she did not know I was "not practicing Islam anymore."' (Moallem 2005: 52) Presuming that someone who comes from a Muslim country or has a Muslim name is necessarily a Muslim is not the bigger problem here, the worrying problem is the tendency to treat those who are Muslims or are assumed to be Muslim differently. The *San Francisco Examiner*'s reporter would not write 'Christian' next to the academic merits of the white American academics they interview even if he or she knew these academic was in fact Christian, even if they were to describe themselves publically as Christians. Few years before this incident, Moallem experienced something similar: 'in a job interview at a very respectable Canadian university, the faculty member who was driving me back to the airport finally managed to ask me the pressing question: Whether I was "a practicing Muslim."' (52)

Being a practicing Muslim does not mean being a fundamentalist, nor does it imply a moral judgement, but being asked about your religion in professional academic circles inevitably raises issues around the endurance of stereotyping:

> Why did my opinion need to be checked against my religious practice? Was it at all possible for me to talk as a woman coming from a Muslim culture without revealing my religious beliefs? Where was the secularist framing to protect me from this journalistic or academic intrusion? Do we ask all feminists who talk about women's issues in the U.S. and elsewhere in the world to identify their religious beliefs? (52)

Just as I used my personal story of how different my Western and non-Western female friends' reactions were to my decision to write a thesis on feminism as a symbolic example of a bigger issue, so Moallem uses her two personal stories as symbolic examples of '"civilizational and counter-civilizational thinking" that constantly mobilizes and dichotomizes both secular and religious universalistic and fundamentalist impulses. They are sometimes

spatial (West/Islam), sometimes temporal (modern/archaic), and sometimes moral (good/evil), and they have become hegemonic since the Enlightenment.' (54)

Journalist Eisa Nefertari Ulen tries to show the flip side of the argument about the mistrust between Western and Muslim feminists. Ulen acknowledges that the general mood among Muslim women never warmed towards western feminism, and she acknowledges that there are valid reasons for that: 'I understand my Muslim sisters' trepidation, because first wave feminism's relationship with African-Americans lacked a cohesion born of acute commitment and fell victim to white supremacist techniques. Likewise, second wave feminism fell victim to the science of divide and conquer.' (Ulen 2005: 45). Yet Ulen believes that generalisations and assumptions about Muslim women are the biggest reasons behind the gap between mainstream Western feminism and Islamic feminism. Bowing and kneeling for God in prayers, committing to certain dress codes that insist on covering the female body completely, and adopting strict rules about sexual life outside marriage could be construed as signs of lack of choice and oppression, but they could also be methods of self-empowerment and a defiant attitude to materialistic modern life: 'Islam fuels my momentum. I empower when I wash and wrap for prayer. I transform out of a space belonging to big city chaos and into a space conjuring inner peace. I renew. With the ritual of Salat [prayer], I generate serenity. I can create and channel strong energy as I pray.' (46) Ulen goes on to talk about hijab, although she states that she does not wear it, as another possible statement of defiance to the over-sexualised Western attitude towards the female body.

Ulen concludes with a call for helpful and pragmatic attitude that she thinks both Western and Muslim women need to adopt. After her defence of Muslim women in the USA and after presenting their case against Western stereotypes, she acknowledges the responsibility of Muslim women to win friends rather than contend with the role of the victim: 'Non-Muslim women need to stop telling Muslim women their traditional Islamic garb symbolizes oppression. Muslim women need to open themselves to coalitions with women in mini-skirts.' (48) What this statement implies is that Muslim women also have their own negative stereotypes about other groups of women based on dress code and concepts of sexual freedom. Ulen believes that 'dynamic diversity might just be what the next wave of American feminism needs', and this diversity is clear in her description of herself as a Muslim woman who is also 'a feminist rooted in the traditions of Sistah Alice Walker.' (49)

Islamic Feminisms

Margot Badran acknowledges the rift in the Western-Muslim dialogue on feminism, but she argues that it is mainly due to the fact that this dialogue has been hijacked by extreme perspectives at both ends:

> Most Muslims have pronounced feminism produced by women in their midst an anathema. Feminism to such opponents served, so they insisted, as another form of Western assault upon their culture, and constituted a blasphemy to religion. Many in the West, on the other hand, have used the trope of "oppressed Muslim women," a set piece in Orientalist discourse, displaying feigned concern for "her" plight, in order to justify colonial and new-colonial incursions into Muslim societies, or simply to make a show of arrogant superiority. (Badran 2009: 1)

In the quotation above, Badran shows the two extreme discourses - the prejudiced Western and the 'reactionary' Muslim discourses - that have made it harder for any feminist working in a Muslim society. As if feminist issues are not challenging enough, especially in societies where the law is much less equal for men and women, feminists in these societies have also had to deal with 'disparaging' mainstream Western feminist and liberal institutions and 'hostile' traditional Muslim institutions that have accused them of implementing Western agendas.

The points of clash and opposition that Badran is referring to bring to mind an important question: who exactly is speaking for and about whom when it comes to issues related to Muslim women. This question is particularly important when the word 'feminism' is repeatedly accused of being a western-liberal Trojan horse that wants to infiltrate and corrupt Muslim communities. Therefore clarifying who is speaking about what and who is important to pull the carpet from underneath those who are always ready with generic accusations to feminists in the Muslim world. Badran is probably the first to pay attention to this issue of claiming feminism by Muslim theorists and activists, so she categorises Muslim feminists as the following:

> Secular feminists [who] used Islamic modernist arguments to demand the equal access for women to the public sphere in the domains of secular education and work, and political rights, as well as to call for women's ability to participate in congregational worship in the mosque… [and] Islamic feminists … [who] have through

> their own *ijtihad* made compelling arguments that the patriarchal model of the family does not conform to the Qur'anic principles of human equality and gender justice. (4)

As useful as Badran's classification of Muslim feminists is, I believe it leaves out significant elements among the theorists and activists who deal with issues of Muslim women. The simple bifurcation of secular versus Islamic in Badran's usage can be difficult when looking at the work of writers like Nawal El-Sa'dawi and Fatima Mernissi- probably the most influential two names in the feminist debate in the Muslim world in the last few decades- who do not identify themselves as either Muslims or non-Muslims despite the fact they were raised as Muslims. Moreover, postcolonial feminists like Gayatri Spivak, and activist groups like Southall Black Sisters in the UK have repeatedly offered thorough and nuanced analyses and discussions on issues that are key and important for Muslim women. The scholarship and activism that non-Muslim feminists have produced on/for Muslim communities make a rich repertoire that should be utilized by Muslim women, especially in non-Muslim countries. Badran also focuses on female feminists, and this is also problematic; Khaled Abou El-Fadl and Muhammad Khalid Masud have been significant figures in the evolution of Islamic feminism. It is worth mentioning here that it was male pioneers who were part of the innovation of the feminist movement in Egypt and the Arab world: the writer Qasim Amin, who wrote a book entitled *The Liberation of Women* in 1899; the Islamic reformist preacher Mohammad Abduh supported the movement in the early twentieth century; and the Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani, dubbed 'the poet of women', who started an unprecedented trend in twentieth-century Arabic poetry of celebrating women's sexuality and women's body in a non-male-centric manner.

For all of these reasons, I have developed my own definition of a critical framework which I am calling 'Islamic Feminisms', which refers to any scholarship, activism, or work that deals with the issues that are key and important for Muslim women, regardless of whether or not the people who produce the feminist work are themselves Muslim or female. In other words, my categorization of the feminist work being produced on issues that are specifically important for Muslim women focuses on the type of work being produce rather than who is producing it. 'Islamic Feminisms' is also very distinct from mainstream Western feminism because it is important to address the cultural, geopolitical, and historic differences between the Wetern feminist experience and the Muslim feminist experience, in order to avoid generic

and unrealistic approaches to the problems of Muslim women; approaches that in many cases alienate Muslim women instead of helping them. Having said that, the focus on plurality in my framework of 'Islamic Feminisms' is essential. It is true that ideology and establishment in the Muslim religion play a significant role in making the experiences of Muslim women similar in some respects, but they are far from identical due to many regional, political, and traditional factors, and this is one reason the plural 's' in Islamic Feminisms is important. Plurality is also important because the approaches to the same issues in the same community are also usually varied.

Before I detail my definition of Islamic Feminisms and the categories it includes, I will gloss some elements and terminologies in Islam that are going to be used repeatedly in the thesis. I should emphasize that this is not a religious study, and that is why I will limit the following overview to key concepts that are largely accepted by all the different branches of Islam. The Islamic law, generally known as shari'a law, has two main sources: the Qur'an and the Hadith. For Muslims, the Qur'an is a collection of verses that had been sent from God to Mohammad through the angel Gabrielle on different occasions over a period of 23 years (from the day of the first revelation and the start of Islam, until Mohammad's death). Some of these verses were sent to help the prophet solve issues that occurred to him as he was setting up his new Muslim community, and other verses were meant to form the basic foundations of religion for all Muslims everywhere and for all times. In this tradition, parts of the Qur'an were gathered in the time of the third khalifa,[6] at least 12 years after Mohammad's death. Muslim historians claim that although there is a huge time gap between the time those verses were revealed and the time they were collected in the Qur'an, it is the exact word-for-word account of what God revealed to Mohammad. They explain this by saying that the Qur'an is God's miracle and law for all mankind, and that he vowed it will be preserved with no distortion, alteration, or relocation of a word, a dot, or a comma until the end of time. Since the time of Othman, one version of the Qur'an has been accepted by all Muslims from all sects and denominations as the unquestioned true account of God's revelations to Mohammad.

[6] 'Khalifa' means 'successor', and it is the title given to those who ruled the Muslim state after Mohammad's death

The Hadith is what the Mohammad said and did in his lifetime, and this is considered a source of law because Muslims believe that the prophet did not do anything in his life that was not inspired by God, either directly through a revelation or indirectly through the intrinsic divine knowledge that was innate to Mohammad. However, unlike the Qur'an, it is accepted that many Hadiths were forged by people after Mohammad's death. That is why there is a discipline in Islamic jurisprudence that investigates all Hadiths to check their authenticity, and the result is that some Hadiths are considered strong and others are considered weak. In reality, these two sources are limited, in the sense that they do not answer questions about everything every time, and that is why many Muslims who strongly believe that every aspect of their lives should be Islamic depend heavily on religious scholars' interpretations, hermeneutics and jurisprudence. Other Muslims believe that the Qur'an and the Hadith are only supposed to be followed to the letter in fundamental issues like worship, theology, and moral guidance, but are not to be used to determine our life style, considering that they appeared in a different time to ours.

It is within these frames that feminist issues emerge and develop in Muslim communities, and Islamic feminists tackle issues with these frame works in mind, but with different levels of attention paid to them. I divide Islamic Feminism into three major categories: Religious Muslim feminists who use Islamic discourse in their arguments, non-religious feminists who use Islamic discourse in their arguments, and non-religious feminists who use secular discourse in their arguments.

1. Religious feminists

There is a strong presence of Muslim feminists who identify themselves publicly as devout and practicing Muslims and use their faith and belief system to prove that the patriarchal and misogynistic practices in some Muslim societies are non-Islamic, and that Islam is in fact an egalitarian religion when it comes to the rights of men and women. This group of feminists embrace and utilise their religiosity and their deep scholarly knowledge of the Qur'an and the Hadith (the two sources of Muslim jurisprudence) to offer a narrative that not only counters the extremist traditionalist interpretation of Islam that disadvantages women, but replaces it with one that places women in an equal position. Equality between genders according to this group is not a value that can be added to Islam, but an integral component of it that has been ignored by the mainstream Muslim establishments around

the world. Amina Wadud, who is one of the most famous and influential names in this category, offers a powerful philosophical and ideological proof why patriarchy is un-Islamic. In Islamic ideology, the faith is based on five main pillars; one of them is 'tawhid', or the belief that there is only one god. Also in Islam there are small sins that can be absolved by good deeds or by earthly punishments, and great sins that can only be absolved by repentance, and the most grave of these sins is 'shirk' or the belief in polytheism. Wadud argues that the concept of patriarchy goes against these most basic concepts in Islam:

> patriarchy is a kind of *shirk*. It places men and women in a relationship that is not capable of reciprocity because one person is 'superior' to the other. Under *tawhid*, this is not possible, because the presence of Allah must remain as the highest focal point. Since a new axis is formulated wherever and whenever Allah is present, and Allah is always present, then no one can hold the upper level without violating *tawhid*. (Wadud 2009: 109)

It is worth mentioning here that equality between men and women is a well-established concept in Islam as the Qur'an states the equal status of men and women very clearly numerous times:

> Indeed, the Muslim men and Muslim women, the believing men and believing women, the obedient men and obedient women, the truthful men and truthful women, the patient men and patient women, the humble men and humble women, the charitable men and charitable women, the fasting men and fasting women, the men who guard their private parts and the women who do so, and the men who remember God often and the women who do so - for them God has prepared forgiveness and a great reward. (Sura 33, verse 35)[7]
>
> O mankind, indeed We have created you from a male and a female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of God is the most righteous of you (Sura 49, verse 13)[8]

These are just two of many examples of the equality in nature between men and women. Of

[7] https://quran.com/33

[8] https://quran.com/49:13

I want to explain here my method of quoting the Qur'an. Qur'an is written in Arabic and there is only one Arabic version of it; it is considered blasphemous for anyone to change anything in it, even a comma or a single letter. However, the translations vary greatly, and sometimes these differences are politically or ideologically driven. For example, I will be using the same online Qur'an throughout my thesis (unless the Qur'anic quotation comes within a quotation from a secondary source), and the translator here refers to God as Allah, which is inaccurate because allah (الله) is the Arabic word for God. I am using my own translation of the Arabic verse that comes first in this online version, followed by the English translation, which I may sometimes use but not depend on it. I will also insert a footnote for each verse I quote for the ease of access to the reader, but in the bibliography I am using one entry for the Qur'an

course, there are also verses that show superiority for men in specific aspects in life (like the status of leadership for man in the family), but the point here is that, unlike some other monotheistic religions, men and women are not unequal intrinsically or in their nature. However, Wadud wanted with this unique reading of patriarchy to accentuate how far-removed the idea of man's superiority is from the core concepts that the Qur'an teaches. Not only, according to Wadud, does patriarchy conflict with the concept of equality between genders in Islam, it also could potentially take away the name of 'Muslim' from you as you are violating a core requirement of being Muslim.

In her book *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam,* Wadud narrates her own personal journey as a young African-American woman who converts to Islam and becomes a world-renowned Islamic feminist activist and theorist, and I feel that her journey symbolizes to some degree what this category of Islamic feminists represents. Wadud converted to Islam after reading some literature that she later realized was an optimistic, simplistic and one-sided account of the position of women in Islam. After starting her own research and fieldwork in many Muslim countries, she came to realize how huge the gap is between what Islam teaches about woman rights and the actual position of women in Muslim countries. She saw that in most Muslim societies, law, politics and culture come together to deprive women, under the name of Islam, of rights that are given to them in Islam. The part of Wadud's story, as she narrates it in this book, that I find symbolic of this group of feminists is her realization that the fight for Muslim women's rights is well and truly an Islamic fight before being a feminist fight. What this means is that Wadud is one of many who realised that Islam is being systematically violated and appropriated by a tangled web of patriarchal cultures, despotic regimes, and colonial interests and influences in order to corrupt it and corrupt Muslim societies, and one of the areas that is most corrupted and appropriated is that concerning family laws and women's rights. The response to this is naturally not denouncing Islam or adopting Western approaches to human rights, because these feminists have already established that Islam itself is not the problem. Instead, the response has been to claim back Islam, and the right to interpret and apply its core egalitarian values, from the corrupt mainstream religious establishments that have hijacked it for centuries. Wadud then focused her attention on studying Islamic jurisprudence and its origins, methods and schools, and one of the results of that knowledge and her activism is the initiative calling for the 'female imam'.

The Imam is the person who leads the prayers at a mosque, and this is a position that has historically been an exclusive right of male religious clergymen. Wadud thinks that having female imams is important for 'removing gender asymmetries in Islamic ritual practices – especially in leadership' (Wadud 2008: 12), and so she started leading prayers herself, armed with her own religious credits, and called for female religious scholars across the world to do the same, and for male and female Muslims to follow these female imams. A similar initiative was started by Sharifa Khanam in India who established the first women-only Mosque in India.[9] Just like Wadud, Khanam was criticised by the religious establishment and even received death threats.[10]

Not all Muslim scholars who use religion to further feminist causes are female, and Professor Khaled Abou Elfadl is one of the most famous Muslim scholars who wrote extensively on female rights and family laws in Islam. In his chapter in *Wanted: Equality and Justice in the Muslim Family*, Abou Elfadl attributes the distance between Islamic tradition and international human rights laws to two main reasons. First to the legacy of the "white Man's Burden" when the colonisers used the slogan of civilising the subjects of the colonies as an excuse to subjugate and control them (Abou El Fadl 2009: 117). Secondly, what Abou Elfadl calls 'puritanism, anti-westernism, and exceptionalism in Muslim discourses' (120) meant that many Muslim societies were more engaged in countering Western narratives than in actually tackling social problems they might have, especially when it came to women's rights. Abou El Fadl concludes with a call and a warning that the Muslim world has got to start an inner dialogue that results in a Muslim contemporary definition of human rights.

2. Non-religious feminists using Islamic discourse

These are feminists who may or may not be Muslim, or could be Muslim but do not use their religious identity as part of their public profile, but they utilise the Islamic holy texts to support their feminist narrative. These feminists use the historic, political, and cultural contexts around the Qur'an and the Hadith and the emergence of many family laws that are linked to Islam, and by doing so they expose the true political reasons behind some of these laws that

[9] http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2008/oct/31/religion-islam
[10] http://newint.org/columns/makingwaves/2004/05/01/daud-sharifa-khanam/

either existed before Islam and linked to it, or emerged after Mohammad's time and were wrongly associated with him. Although this category of feminists seems to use very similar arsenal against patriarchal and misogynistic practices in the Muslim world to religious feminists, yet it is distinct. While religious feminists subvert the assumption that being devoutly religious, especially Muslim, means that you cannot be a progressive feminist, this category of non-religious feminists subverts of the assumptions of traditionalists in the Muslim world, who believe that Islamic jurisprudence and hermeneutics are exclusive rights for the mainstream religious establishments and its graduates.

Fatima Mernissi is someone who exemplifies this category. In her book *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Muslim Society,* Mernissi analyses the issues of sexuality, female agency, and the position of woman in the Muslim family by offering a thorough study of the social life, conventions and traditions of family life and sexuality in Pre-Islamic Arabia, and then analysing the emergence of Islamic laws and their impact on family and female rights in light of the socio-political situation in Arabia at the time of Mohammad. She argues that some practices that have been adopted for pragmatic and political reasons do not constitute laws about sexuality, female agency and family laws that must be followed in all societies and in different eras. That book, followed by her other famous book *The Harem Within: A Tale of a Moroccan Girlhood,* in which she reflects on her childhood in the harem and her opposition to the confinement of Moroccan women to the inside of their homes in traditional household in the 1940s-1950s, brought on her a lot of criticism and accusations that she was misrepresenting Islam and Muslim societies in a way that served Western negative narratives about Islam.[11] Mernissi's answer was to take away establishment religious scholars' claim to be representing Islam, and to reclaim the right to interpret the religious texts using a feminist perspective in her book *The Veil and The Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights In Islam*. In this book, Mernissi tries to refute the claim that certain Islamic rules regarding women are divine and unquestionable, and she does this in three ways. She investigates the context in which certain verses in Qu'ran have been revealed to set the record right about which ones were meant to be fixed rules for all times and which ones tackled only specific issues contemporary to the revelation of the verse. She questions the credibility of

[11] I go into some details about how even fellow Islamic feminists like Fadwa El-Guindi accused Mernissi of following Western agendas in chapter one about hijab.

certain narrators of the Hadith. Finally, she gives a new linguistic and semiotic interpretation of certain verses to show the possible diversity of meanings in these verses, although early Muslim interpreters of the Qur'an confined themselves and most Muslims with them for centuries, to one of the possible meanings.

A plethora of verses in the Qur'an assert and insist on equality between male and female as individuals. However, family laws and the institution of marriage are areas where inequality is apparent and man is designated superior to women. Mernissi's study of the society in which Mohammad lived and Islam appeared led her to discover that all family laws put in place by Islam were progressive leaps that shook the foundations of a society where a man could, for example, not only inherit all his father's money and property after he dies without leaving anything to the wives, but also the man could inherit his father's wives. In pre-Islamic Medina, a man could have as many wives as he could afford, female slaves did not have the right to refuse sexual intercourse with their masters, and poor people buried their female new-borns alive because they feared they would not be able to feed them (females did not work outside home) and also feared they would not be able to protect them from invaders from other tribes (kidnapping a female in a raid from another tribe was considered a great shame). All the practices mentioned above were banned under Islam, which shows that the rules Islam brought to the Arab society back then were not only progressive but also revolutionary. Mernissi also shows how this produced criticisms from early Muslims who opposed Mohammad's new regulations regarding women, and most importantly, this made it even harder to convince the non-Muslim men to join Islam and give up their privileges. Moreover, Mernissi shows that many of the revelations which Mohammad received from God about women came after an incident in which a woman came to Mohammad and objected to her bad condition: 'God has heard the woman who debated with you about her husband, and complained to God, while He hears your debate. GOD is Hearer, Seer.'(Sura 58, verse 1)[12] This means that those revelations that improved woman's status in society were triggered by a wave of demands by women that almost took the shape of a women's movement. Mernissi concludes from her findings that if Islamic laws came about as a way of reducing the suffering of women in certain Arab societies in the 7th century, and if some of these laws came as a direct response to demands from women, then those rules should not be fixed for all times

[12] http://quran.com/58.

and places. What needs to be fixed is the drive behind them, which was, and should still be the betterment of the status of the most vulnerable in society, including women. Mernissi does a particularly exhaustive job in analysing verses and Hadiths related to hijab and linking them to socio-political aspects that surrounded the time those verses and Hadiths appeared, and I will go into this with details in chapter one about hijab.

Dr. Maha Yamani is a specialist in law, particularly Islamic law, and she also uses Qur'anic evidence to refute certain misogynistic practices in the name of Islam. One of the strongest examples Yamani uses is the issue of polygamy. She starts by analysing the verse on polygamy that says 'And if you fear you will not be fair to the orphans then marry whomever you please of the [other] women, two, three and four. And if you fear you will not be just then only one [woman], or whatever your right hand possesses.[13] This makes it more likely that you will not wrong [the women]' (Sura 4, verse 3)[14]. Yamani then goes on to provide a long list of opinions on polygamy by many renowned Islamic jurists who completely ignore the social conditions behind the practice of polygamy, that it is for the sake of protecting orphans, and who ignore the call to have only one wife in the case of treating multiple wives unjustly. (Yamani 2008: 16-17) Instead, these jurists provide a plethora of justifications and reasons for polygamy, none of which has any mention in the Qur'an or the Hadith, including the claim that man's natural sexual drive requires multiple sexual partners whereas a woman's sexual nature is satisfied by one man. (20) Some secular countries with an overwhelming Muslim majority have banned polygamy, like Turkey and Tunisia, and traditionalists in the Muslim world claim that this cannot be applied in Muslim countries because even though the Qur'an discourages polygamy when it says 'And you will not be able to be just with your wives even if you try ardently' (Sura 4, verse 129) yet god did not ban it, and it is not up to humans to ban what god allows. Yamani responds to this by pointing out how slavery is something else that is discouraged but not banned in the Qur'an, yet all the Muslim countries in the world, even the most extremist in their interpretation and application of Islamic laws banned slavery many decades ago. (Yamani 2008: 21)

In a lecture at the Arab and Islamic Institute at the University of Exeter in 2014 Yamani made the case that the idea that there is such a thing as *the* sharia law is a myth. Instead, there are

[13] slaves
[14] http://quran.com/4

almost as many laws allegedly based on the Qur'an and sharia as there are Muslim countries. There are no two identical laws in any two Muslim countries, and the differences are sometimes small and sometimes major or even contradictory. In her book *Polygamy and Law in Contemporary Saudi Arabia*, Yamani shows examples of how culture, tradition, politics, and nation all play significant roles in determining each country's version of shari'a law, and how often these versions could have no base in the Qur'an or the Hadith, as she shows in the discussion on polygamy.

3. Non-religious feminists using secular discourse.

This group, like the previous one, does not mean that the feminists included in it are necessarily non-Muslims, but they are feminists who do not use Islam as an identity marker publicly. They differ from the first two groups in that they do not depend on Islamic narrative and discourses to make their arguments for Muslim women's rights. Egyptian feminist Nawal El-Saadawi exemplifies this category perfectly. In exploring five of her early books written in Arabic between 1969-1975, it is evident that she identifies and analyses the problems that face Egyptian women, hardly mentioning the words 'Islam' or 'Muslim' at all. The reason for that is that Saadawi firmly believes that patriarchy is an international problem that takes different shapes and forms but has similar core in all patriarchal societies. In *Woman and Sex* (first published in Arabic in Cairo 1969), Saadawi portrays many practices that are common in the bringing up of children in Egyptian society that help shape and define the characteristics of male and female members of the family and society. Saadawi attributes all the gender roles that are taken for granted in patriarchal societies to the simple fact of the ways in which children are brought up; that a boy is raised to consider himself superior, a provider and protector who must show off and accentuate his masculinity or else he will risk being looked at as effeminate and unnatural. On the other hand, a girl who is always reminded by her mother and her society that she must protect her modesty to avoid being considered immoral develops a subconscious hatred of her body, her sexuality, and of men, who might take away her modesty and decency. The control of female sexuality in the name of modesty is a tool for controlling the female herself, since the same focus on decency and modesty is not stressed for boys. Saadawi goes back to pre-historic times to show how the originally

matriarchal societies became patriarchal after man found ways to increase his wealth through grabbing more land and livestock and used the economy to control the family and society, while women were confined to the private sphere giving birth to children and raising them. (Saadawi 1990: 64-65) From that background, Saadawi moves to contemporary times to make a comparison between capitalist and socialist societies, and she argues that capitalist societies are more patriarchal and have more sex crimes and prostitution than socialist societies. Saadawi also notices many similar practices between capitalist and religious conservative societies, like the focus on and the championing of Freudian theories, the increased focus on women's dress and behavioural codes, and the fight against contraception, all of which are practices that aim at imposing more control over women, as part of the over-all control over any minority or human rights groups that go against the status quo. (122-123)

Saadawi's writing is very similar to Betty Friedan's and Germaine Greer's in that it focuses on the universality of the feminist issue and analyses the core psychological, educational, and systematic roots of many negative aspects of the experiences of women in their families and societies. It should not be understood though that this means Saadawi ignores the cultural specificity of Egyptian, Arab, or Muslim societies when she addresses feminist issues in these societies; in fact, Saadawi studies the feminist issues in these societies exhaustively and empirically. Saadawi is a physician and psychiatrist as well as an author and an activist, and she utilises her medical background in her book *Woman and Neurosis* (first published in Arabic in Cairo 1975). This book draws on medical and social research through which Saadawi analyses a number of psychological problems that are common among Egyptian men and women using data she collected from her work at her private practice and in the Ein Shams university hospital. Saadawi shows how sexual ignorance and the absence of sex education in Egypt, the traumatic experience of female genital mutilation (as Saadawi herself was subjected to as a child)[15] the over reliance on men, the absence of economic autonomy, and many other phenomena in the Egyptian society have resulted in many neuroses becoming common in the Egyptian society, and at a significantly higher rate among females.

I have to point out at the end of my description of the three branches of Islamic Feminisms that these categories are defined and characterised by the narratives and discourses that each

[15] Saadawi tells the story of how she was forcibly circumcised at the age of six in chapter one of: El-Saadawi, N. (2007). *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*. London: Zed Books.

one of them uses, and not by the feminists I mentioned in each category. The reason I am stressing this is that most of these feminists have literature and research that come under more than one category. Iranian theorist Ziba Mir-Hosseini, for example, could be described as a secular feminist who uses Islamic discourse and secular discourse in her research. Mir-Hosseini famously had long discussions with a number of key figures in the Iranian theocratic and Islamic judicial establishments in Iran, and then presented those dialogues and in her book *Islam and Gender: The religious Debate in Contemporary Iran,* and her powerful documentary *Divorce Iranian Style*. On the other hand, Mir-Hosseini has some subtle and insightful observations about how Iranian women actually utilised the narrative of the Islamic revolution to gain more power and presence in public and political life in the country. This part of her research is clearly informed and conducted using her academic background as a social anthropologist, and not using the Islamic reformist narrative.

Pakistani Islamic feminist Asma Barlas also has work that can be located in two different categories of Islamic feminisms. She too is one of those who offer an interpretation of the Qur'an and the Hadith that counters and subverts the orthodox interpretations of religious establishments. She also looks into the global Islamic feminist movement in a way that acknowledges, but does not necessarily use, Islamic discourse. An interesting example away from the world of academia is those young female Egyptian activists who helped light the spark of revolution in Egypt in 2011, namely Nawara Negm and Asmaa Mahfouz. Both of these activists had been famous bloggers and political activists in Egypt for years before the revolution, and they adopted and embraced with commitment and zeal their Islamic identities and utilised it in their activism and campaigning for different human rights and feminist issues. However, after the brief and momentary success of the Egyptian revolution, Negm and Mahfouz adopted a strong secular political line and fought hard against the attempts by Muslim Brotherhood and Salafists to hijack the revolution and the post-Mubarak government and make it Islamist. For them, secular politics and Islamic belief went hand in hand, but the Islamist wave that overwhelmed the political life in Egypt in the period between the two dictatorships of Mubarak and Sisi labelled them and their secular politics as heretics and traitors.

The structure of the chapters

In the chapters that follow, I explore three key areas of concern that emerge from these Islamic feminisms and that are central to the theatrical representation of Muslim women's experience in the last ten years. The issues I focus on are the question of the hijab, the position of women in the Muslim family, and the fraught question of integration/ non-integration of Muslim women in British society. Each chapter begins with an analysis of the social, political, and religious backgrounds to the issue, and the cultural debates and discourses around it. This background analysis draws on the theories of Islamic Feminisms that I have identified, and explores ideas of cultural hybridity, representation and self-representation. In chapter two, there are obvious crossovers between Islamic feminisms and second wave Western feminism in relation to transnational ideas of patriarchal family organisation. In chapter three, the debates of Islamic feminism are integrated with other discourses around questions of acculturation, assimilation, and integration. In each chapter, I have selected two or three plays that dwell centrally on the issues under debate. My analyses of the play texts looks at performance as a social and cultural experience in itself, as well as exploring what each performance contributes to the overall cultural debate about the topic of the chapter. I could not watch all of these plays live, so in some cases I am using play texts, reviews, and interviews with the playwrights in my analysis. I have interviewed three of the playwrights myself: Alia Bano, author of *Shades* and *Hens*, Stephanie Street, author of *Sisters* and lead character in *Shades, Sweet Cider* and *Sisters*, and Atiha Sen Gupta, author of *What Fatima Did*.

One issue that I do not discuss although it is very significant in any discussion about Muslim women in Britain is class. For Muslims in Britain the class issue is manifold: the effects that the class system in Britain has on the Muslim communities, the effects that the cast system in India/Pakistan/Bangladesh has on the Muslim communities in Britain, and, to a lesser degree, the effects of the dichotomies of Arab- non-Arab, and Black-Asian have within the Muslim communities in Britain. The main reason I do not address the class issue is that it is such a complicated and multi-layered issue that it would open the discussion in the thesis too widely. Class/cast do have a role to play in each of the issues I discuss, but without conducting a deep analysis of the roots of class/cast factors before looking at how they affect the three issues I focus on in this thesis, the treatment would be rushed and superficial. Another reason

why an analysis of the role of class/cast cannot be rushed is that they are problems that exist across religions and ethnicities, so to unpick how specifically they affect Muslim women in Britain in a way that is different to how they affect Hindu or Sikh women, for example, is big research in itself. A careful and thorough analysis of class/cast and the Muslim women in Britain is probably a job for another research project/paper/book.

I am not setting out to claim my reading as a definitive one for each play, nor do I claim that mine is an exhaustive discussion and analysis of the topics of the chapters. There are so many ethnic, national, communal, economic and political reasons that make it impossible to consider Muslim women, or British Muslim women, or even British Muslim women from a Pakistani background who live in Sheffield, for example as one homogenous group. In fact, I argue in chapter three that many of the injustices that befell Muslim women in the West come from just this approach, when Western governments pursue policies that treat Muslims and Muslim women as one homogenous group when they address issues related to Muslim women in their countries. What I am trying to do in what follows is to start a conversation about why and how British theatre has depicted certain Muslim feminist issues, to analyse the background from which these depictions appear, and to evaluate what these theatrical performances add to the debate about these issues in contemporary British society.

I have found a growing body of scholarship on British South Asian theatre to draw upon, but these plays and playwrights, and surprisingly, these themes relating to Muslim women in the UK, have been very little considered in scholarly literature to date, and my study is an attempt to contribute to this emerging body of knowledge.

Chapter One

The Hijab

Introduction

To question the topic of Muslim women's veiling, in the shape of hijab or niqab, is a sensitive and problematic task because it requires the critique of numerous stereotypes. It is a sensitive and problematic topic within Muslim communities because of the clashes between the extremists who try to impose it on everyone and the other type of extremists who try to absolutely ban it because they consider it a sign of backwardness. It is also sensitive and significant subject because of its great effects on the everyday life of the women who wear it, and those refuse to wear it in places where it is common practice. Hijab is also sensitive and problematic in non-Muslim communities for the same reasons that make it so in Muslim communities. More recently the stereotypical link that is common in Western societies between Islam and terrorism has further politicised the veil, as it is a strong indicator that one is a Muslim. This topic is, therefore, linked with certain stereotypes in the general perception of Muslim communities, and also linked to different set of stereotypes within non-Muslim communities.

I have always prepared myself to the idea that my research may not be welcome among Muslim religious establishments and traditionalists who do not usually appreciate any scholarly effort that casts doubts on the classical interpretations of Islam, especially those relating to women's conduct. However, as I engaged with the Islamic feminist studies I noticed that even among Muslim female writers and Islamic feminists themselves, when it comes to the issue of hijab there has been tension and the exchange of serious accusations. What do these heated discourses and debates between Islamic feminists around the hijab indicate about the status of women in the Muslim world?

Hijab in Islam

Before I get into details about Islamic feminists' scholarly debates, I will try to draw a background picture of the stereotypes regarding the veil in Islam, to uncover where the problematic elements of this issue come from. It is accepted among mainstream Islamic jurisprudence that an adolescent Muslim female should wear a hijab (a scarf that covers her hair) and she should also cover all her body anytime a male who is not an immediate family member could see her. However, while this idea is largely accepted and taken for granted among mainstream Muslim clergymen and traditional Muslims, there remain many questions about it, even among those who believe in it. The three most common questions concern faith, compulsion and extent. Is a Muslim female who does not wear the hijab but observes all other teachings of Islam considered someone whose faith is incomplete? Or is the difference between those wear it and those who do not but observe the general teachings of Islam more like the difference between someone who volunteers to charity one day a week and someone who does two days a week; both good but one is better? Second, supposing it is agreed that Muslim females should wear hijab, does this 'should' give the family, the religious authorities, or even the state the right to force them to wear it, or is this exclusively between the female and her God? Third, is hijab enough, or does there need to be a full covering for the face (niqab, burqa, or chador)? And what kind of dress is appropriate if hijab is worn?

There are many different fatwas (Islamic rulings) about the niqab. Some consider it a must, especially the salafist and wahhabi sheikhs of Saudi Arabia and Egypt.[16] Others, like the mufti of Syria and the renowned Azhar institution in Egypt consider it a practice that is alien to Islam. In fact, the former Grand Imam of Azhar went as far as banning the wearing the niqab in the Azhar university, supporting the right of France to ban the niqab, and even famously bullied a young student at one of the Azhar institutes for wearing it, forcing her to take it off and mocking her when she revealed her face saying 'what would you have done if you were pretty?' in an incident that shocked many Egyptians and triggered an unprecedented wave of

[16] http://www.mufti.af.org.sa/allftwa

public criticism directed towards the Grand Imam of Azhar.[17] However, all the heads of the big mainstream Islamic institutions agree on the hijab; they consider it a must and an integral part of being a Muslim woman. Saudi Arabia and Iran are currently the only two countries where not wearing the hijab by women is officially punishable by law, yet the hijab is actually enforced either directly by parents or the male guardian (who could be the brother or the husband) or indirectly by a scrutinising and relentlessly judgemental society that makes life very difficult for the female who does not wear the hijab.

Many scholars and activists have critiqued the practice of veiling and the inequality between men and women in the Muslim world from a humanitarian or a feminist point of view which believes women should be equal to men in everything. While this attitude has a moral significance, the social, cultural, political, and religious circumstances within Muslim societies make this difficult to achieve in reality. Moroccan Islamic feminist Fatima Mernissi is one of those who knew that when it comes to a topic as sensitive as hijab one should study it and critique it from within the Islamic discourse itself in order to be heard in the Muslim world. She went beyond the expected idealistic discourse of Western feminists and Islamic feminists who follow the Western way of approaching feminist issues. Mernissi challenges the Muslim sheikhs who assert that hijab is an obligatory and non-negotiable part of being Muslim using the Qur'an itself in her book *The Veil and the Male Elite.* Mernissi starts with the verse that mentions the word 'hijab' for the first time, and it is a verse 53 in sura 33 (Al Ahzab).[18] The literal translation of the word 'hijab' is cover, and in this verse the hijab is a curtain that god advices Mohammad to have in his house to separate the private part of his household where his wives would be from the public part of the house where he meets people, and in the same verse god orders the Muslims to speak to the women and daughters of Mohammad from behind these curtains. Mernissi cites the most renowned interpreters of the Qur'an who unanimously agree that this verse came after an incident in one of Mohammad's weddings, when some of the guests lingered too much and embarrassed Mohammad before they left. (Mernissi 1991: 85-87) Mernissi links this story of this verse to another one that happened chronologically after it, which is when Omar, one

[17] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4HnxNMW8qFo
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9BGRE1lwAro
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rdXKF8f6GbE
[18] Qur'an is divided into 114 suras (chapters) and each one of them consists of a different number of verses.

of the closest companions of Mohammad, suggested to him that his wives should not mix with men because they receive all sorts of people in their houses, good and bad. (184-185) Omar's key word was that the prophet's women should 'yahtajebn' which is the verb from 'hijab', and so it could mean that he is asking for the women to wear the veil or to isolate themselves behind the curtain in the house and not mix with men. Shortly after this incident, the first one of two verses that directly ask Muslim women to wear a head cover was revealed. The Sura is:

O Prophet, tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to bring down over themselves [part] of their outer garments. That is more suitable that they will be known and not be abused. And ever is God Forgiving and Merciful. (sura 33, verse 59)[19]

Supporters of the claim that the hijab is a must argue that the succession of Omar's advice and the revelation of this verse are proof that god agrees with Omar and that Muslim women in general, not just in the prophet's household, should cover their bodies and heads in front of men. Mernissi, on the other hand, reminds us of the specific incident that happened and caused the revelation of this verse, and this cause of revelation is, again, agreed upon by all interpreters as true, yet is widely ignored. Mohammad is originally from Mecca, but he had to emigrate with the minority who supported him there to escape assassination by the leaders of Mecca. He emigrated to Medina after delegates from that city swore allegiance to him. Not everyone in Medina supported Mohammad, and those who opposed Mohammad tried to sabotage his attempts to found a state starting from Medina by sexually harassing Muslim women who came from Mecca, claiming that they did not know if they were free or slave women. Harassment of slave women was accepted in pre-Islamic Arabia, and the men who opposed Mohammad used the excuse that they thought the women they were harassing were slaves in order to start a civil war in Medina. The Qur'anic advice was that Muslim women should wear head scarves to distinguish themselves and not be abused.

The conclusion Mernissi draws from her detailed analysis of the historical, political, and social background of these three stories is that the hijab of Muslim women, be it behind curtains in their homes or more commonly, in the covering of body and head, was a political and social necessity that Mohammad had to endure, and did not want. Mernissi argues that Mohammad

[19] http://quran.com/33

was forced to separate his women from his public life, and that he rejected Omar's calls to 'hijab' them. Instead, he tried to advocate a new culture of respect and agency for women, alongside his reformist new laws on marriage and inheritance that revolutionised women's position in Medina, but faced with the prospect of the sabotage of his entire message by the opposition in Medina, he had to accept the alienation of women from the public sphere. (Mernissi 1991: 187-188)

Despite Mernissi's thorough and exhaustive study of the first verse that uses the word hijab in its general meaning, and the first verse that mentions the veiling of the head, she has been criticised for ignoring the only other verse that is considered by most Muslims as a call for wearing the head cover, and that is verse 31 of sura 24 (An-nur):

> And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (naturally) appear thereof; that they should draw their scarves over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husband's fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers, their brothers' sons, their sisters' sons, their women, the slaves whom their right hands possess, male servants free of physical needs, or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex; and that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments. And O ye believers turn ye all together towards God, that ye may succeed. (Sura 24, verse 31)[20]

This verse is clearly problematic because its wording leaves the door wide open for interpretations of whether or not this is a suggestion or a direct order for Muslim women, what exactly 'naturally' shows of a woman's beauty, and does the drawing of the veil over the bosom mean that it goes over the head and the face (like the chador), or that the veil goes on the sides of the face and under it to cover the bosom (like the common form of hijab), or does it simply mean that the veil goes over the shoulders and bosom? Another thorough examination of the socio-political and linguistic context of this verse, like the one Mernissi did with the other veiling verse, still has not been done. In short, the two widely used Quranic pieces of evidence on obligatory hijab are one verse that urges a decent way of dressing

[20] http://quran.com/24. This is another example of the translation being ideologically influenced, because the translator uses 'headcovers' whereas the literal translation of the Arabic word is 'scarf'. The assumption here is that it is a head-cover, but a scarf could actually be used on the shoulders. A Muslim woman who does not speak Arabic and depends on this translation- which is very common- would take it as a direct order to cover the head, whereas another understanding of this verse is to use the scarf to cover the cleavage for modesty.

without specifically and clearly saying how, and another one that was meant to solve a specific problem that faced Muslim women at a certain time in the early years of Islam.

The Hijab Debate in Muslim Countries

I mentioned before how the accusatory exchange between those who are argue for and against hijab exists also amongst feminists, and not just between feminists and traditionalists. Mernissi's research and analyses of the Qur'an and the Hadith did not mean that she is someone who is defending the rights of Muslim women, according to Professor Fadwa El Guindi, the Egyptian anthropologist, and author of *Veil: Modesty, Privacy and Resistance*. This book is a detailed study of the anthropology of the veil, not only in Islam and in Muslim communities, but also in a number of Mediterranean and Middle Eastern civilisations centuries before Islam. In a chapter in this book entitled *Ideological Roots of Ethnocentrism*, El Guindi attacks some feminists, including Mernissi, who 'in their defence of women ... reaffirm the imagery of the sexual character of harems. The feminist construction of the harem as a sexual institution is not dissimilar from the colonial and Orientalist position' (El-Guindi 1999: 23), and Mernissi herself, according to El Guindi 'reaffirms this Euro-Christiano-centric perspective when she describes the Muslim harem' (25). Although El Guindi is most likely referring to Mernissi's *The Harem Within* in her statement above, yet I find it intriguing that an anthropologist who writes an entire book about the veil and criticises Mernissi's account of her childhood experience in the harem, ignores the socio-political study Mernissi offers of the emergence of the Islamic version of the veil. I will readdress this Islamic-feminists disagreement on many levels and in detail in another part of this research and will now focus on El Guindi's main findings in her study of the head covering. The key points that El Guindi studies and elaborates on in this book are fourfold. She finds that head covering is not a product of Islam or of the Arabs, and is part of a set of practices 'veil-harem-eunuchs-seclusion-polygamy' linked with Islam and Arabs but which actually 'originated millennia ago and spread across the Persian, Mesopotamian, Hellenic, and Byzantine civilisations... presumably having borrowed between ruling dynasties throughout the region, eventually to become ordinary social practice.' (3) Second, El Guindi suggests that the study of the veil comes from two disciplines: woman studies and ethnography, and this makes it insufficient, according to El Guindi, because veil has not been studied anthropologically as a dress pattern that has social, economic, and geographic significances. (3-9) El Guindi argues that the

stereotypical image of the hijab in the West comes as part of a much wider stereotypical image of the harem phenomenon, created by European orientalists and tailor-made to circulate as a kind of justification for controlling the orient under the pretext of freeing and modernising it. Algerian writer Malek Alloula believes that those orientalists have created an image of a harem that is a 'phantasmical absence of limitation to sexual pleasure' and a 'carnivalesque orgy' (Alloula 1987: 62). El Guindi ridicules the orientalists' accounts of harem in the East with the paradox that 'Muslim women are presented as caged, inaccessible and imprisoned behind walls and bars, hidden from men; yet travellers, explorers, artists and scholars had produced an enormous volume of paintings, photos, postcards and writings depicting these women in details.' (El Guindi 1999: 37) Beside, denying the sexual nature of harem, El Guindi also rejects the idea of the seclusion of women in the harem. For El Guindi, the harem is about privacy and not seclusion, arguing that 'Arab privacy does not connote the "personal", the "secret" or the "individual" space. It concerns two core spheres- women and family... For women it is both a right and an exclusive privilege... Arab privacy is about neither individualism nor seclusion. It is relational and public.' (82).

Finally, El Guindi noted the rapid rise since the late 1970s in the number of women who would wear the hijab in Egypt, Palestine and Syria. Of course, the hijab became more common in Iran as well after 1979 and the Islamists' seize of power but the main reason for that increase was that it became obligatory by law. However, I mentioned the examples of Egypt, Syria, and Palestine because in those countries it increased for reasons which are quite contrary to those in Iran: it increased despite the governments' attempts to stop it and even ban it in some public places. This wave of adoption of the hijab changed the face of cities like Cairo and Damascus from ones where hijab was common among the poorer and less educated components of society and almost absent among university students, the educated elite and the upper class, into two cities were hijab wearing was in the majority, whether it be among educated people, rich people, middle class or the poor and the uneducated. El Guindi attributes this to political reasons as well as for existential reasons related to the individual's need to assert one's identity. The repeated defeats of Arab armies against Israel, the helplessness of Arab regimes towards Israel's continued occupation of Arab lands, backwardness in economic-social-civil and other aspects of life, corruption and dictatorship, all these factors piled up and created a sense of disappointment, distrust, and anger with

leaders and governments in the Arab nations, especially among the youth. Those internal factors combined with the anti-Western sentiment that has always been ignited by USA's and Europe's undying support of Israel against the Palestinians, and later on erupted even more obviously with the USA's wars against and occupation of Arab and Muslim countries, and deepened the sense of loss and frustration among Arab youth who felt the need to look for a refuge and a galvanising ideology. 'Embedded in today's hijab is imagery that combines notions of respectability, morality, identity and resistance.' (184) The political symbolism of hijab and the attitude of defiance and self-assertion behind it have also been noticed and acknowledged by Western scholars who studied hijab, not only by mainly anti-Western defenders of hijab like El Guindi. Dominic McGoldrick, in rejecting European stereotypes about hijab as a sign of Islamic backwardness, explained 'In Islamic states that have emerged from colonialism or pro-Western rule the practice of veiling has been reintroduced as an anti-colonial and anti-imperialist symbol. What is perceived as appropriate dress for Islamic women is a positive affirmation of their Eastern identity and cultural purity. But it is also derived from anti-Western reaction not to follow the perceived indecency of European "dolls".' (McGoldrick 2006: 14)

The first three of what I consider the key arguments in El Guindi's book actually crystalize what I think is a great drawback in the Islamic feminist movement. Many Islamic theorists and activists respond to the stereotypical propaganda against the hijab with a counter stereotypical propaganda which gives its full attention to what is good about the hijab and completely neglect any shortcomings or any problems with this phenomenon. For example, El Guindi concludes with some confidence that the harem phenomenon is actually an 'exclusive privilege' and not a seclusion and imprisonment, but she forgets, or neglects the simple fact that no privilege is forced! She makes no reference in her praise of this 'privilege' to the other side of the story in which the hijab and harem life style is forced on women and not chosen by them. She also finds it important and relevant to explain in detail how in some countries there is a head cover for men as well, thus trying to deny the oppressive and discriminatory elements of the hijab for women. Yet even in this example El Guindi conveniently ignores the fact that no man in those countries have ever been lashed or jailed or punished in any way for choosing not to wear his traditional head dress. I am not denying that there are situations in some societies where the hijab and the harem does provide some

sort of a privilege to females, neither am I denying the importance of Gunidi's dress anthropology approach to the study of the hijab, but I am shedding light on the grave mistake of what I can only describe as polarisation and 'polemics and counter-polemics' in the studies and researches about the hijab. Mernissi dedicates most of her books and scholarly work to proving that the hijab is man's social-political product to control women and that the patriarchal society in the Muslim world linked it to religion to reproduce tighter control. She clearly wants her work to expose the negative practices related to the hijab in Muslim cultures, and she makes a convincing case when she does this using the Qur'an and the Hadith to support her findings, yet she represents the worries and passions of only one part of women who wear the hijab, those unhappy at being forced directly or indirectly to wear it. By addressing the issue from only one angle, feminists like Mernissi could be distancing and estranging themselves from millions of women around the world who happily embrace this dress code for many reasons, and who do not care about the history and politics imbedded in the hijab, but only care about what it does to them in their personal life and in their particular societies.

In Egypt and Syria, one can still find liberals and educated people who look down on wearers of the hijab with either disrespect or sympathy. This reflects the estrangement between some feminists and liberals, and some of the women who wear hijab. El Guindi presents a collection of some of the harsh reactions to the mushrooming of hijab in Egypt:

> A rather trivial response to the contemporary veiling came from radical secularists, who ridiculed the trend using exclusivist, materialist language: "these women are covering their hair because they can't afford to go to the hairdresser!" Or "they are veiling to hide their ugliness."... "students of peasant background coping with the big city." (El Guindi 1999: 161)

The kind of polarisation that Islamic feminists adopt either puts hijabed women in the category of victims of a backward and oppressive mentality, or in the category of victims of intolerant anti-hijab people. What hijabed women really need is a balanced view on the issue that encompasses all sort of veiled women in all different situations, and respects the individual cases that do not always fit in with the results of studies and researches.

Many women adopted the hijab as a political attitude- and in this sense it is far from being a symbol of oppression but becomes one of defiance- the Iranian feminist Ziba Mir-Hosseini points out how the hijab has become a weapon in the hand of women in Iran. The hijab has enabled women to go head to head with men in a conservative society removing from this patriarchal society the excuse that 'fear for modesty' should preclude women from being involved in public life. In this sense, hijab became a tool for young women to overcome restrictions and obstacles imposed by society: 'Many women today owe their jobs, their economic autonomy, and their public persona, to compulsory hejab. There are women who found in it a sense of worth and moral high ground... In a bizarre way hejab has even empowered those whom it was meant to restrain: Westernized middle-class women.' (Mir Hosseini 1996: 156-157)

The Hijab Debate in the West

So far I have been trying to highlight the main issues, arguments, clashes and stereotypes relating to the hijab in Muslim countries, or countries with a Muslim majority. Now I will look at a different set of concerns, attitudes, and debates about the hijab from a Western, and British perspective. I am interested here in looking at how hijab is seen and dealt with in the West, and how it affects the lives of those who wear it and the other members of the community as well. What I will not be looking at here is how the West looks at hijab generally whether it was in a Muslim or non-Muslim country, and that is because my interest is not really the debates and literature on hijab in the abstract, but the real and direct effect that hijab has on societies and individuals.

As I mentioned before, the issues that the hijab raises in Western countries are different to those in Muslim countries, sometimes completely different and sometimes similar but with different intensity or from a different perspective. Just like in Muslim countries, hijab issues, as lived by those who either wear it or interact by those who wear it, are much more complex than what is in the general stereotypes produced through television and tabloids. The ready stereotypes about the hijab, in which women are victims, forced to wear it, are a mix of superiority, judgment, condescension, and even sympathy, drawn from the norms of human rights and feminism. Dominic McGoldrick noticed how this Western approach could become contradictory: 'Through Western eyes the veil is commonly seen as an instrument and symbol

of oppression and inequality of women under Islam… This explains why the French philosopher Bernard-Henry Levy can argue that "the fight against the veil is for the liberty of women and for human rights." Of course, his account presupposes a particular conception of human rights in the pursuit of which it is necessary to override the autonomy and agency of some women.' (McGoldrick 2006: 13)

McGoldrick's observations on the phenomenon of the hijab examines what people tell us about themselves through their attitudes about the hijab and their interaction with hijabed women. 'Veiling can have symbolism for the wearer and the observer… Veils can also be problematic for the observer. Some people are offended by the practice of veiling at all, at least in Western societies. … many in the West find it difficult to imagine how rational women would freely choose to veil. Therefore, if they do, it must be because they have been kept uneducated or are being coerced. This image is consistent with the colonial image of the Orient which viewed veiling as a sign of the backwardness of Islamic societies.' (14-15) McGoldrick here suggests that the stereotypes about hijab and hijabed women have their roots in imperialistic propaganda. And who says the time of empires is gone? Empires still exist but in different shapes and under different names, and also their propaganda and attempts to depict others as the dangerous and uncivilised enemy that needs to be civilised and conquered still exist too.[21] The tragic terrorist attacks of September 11 2001 in New York, and July 7 2005 in London were committed by Al Qaeda which claims to be Islamic and fighting for Islamic causes around the world, and this triggered a huge wave of anti-Muslim sentiments in USA and Europe. Of course, this wave affected hijabed women the most because they can be identified as Muslims more easily than Muslim men or Muslim women who do not wear hijab. Those who are against the hijab had a new momentum now: it was not only a sign of backwardness and oppression of women, it had also become a sign of being affiliated with terrorists directly or indirectly. I came across an article in *The Times* by British journalist and former Conservative MP Matthew Parris describing how offended and annoyed he was to see a family of a man, a wife who wears niqab and their teen kids walking and sightseeing in the streets of Sydney. The article is just another personal account of intolerance and lack of acceptance that contribute to the mood of hate speech against Muslims after 9/11 and 7/7 attacks, but I find its title very representative of that mood: *Never Mind what the Woman*

[21] In chapter three I go into great depth discussing this idea of 'othering'

Thinks, Wearing a Veil is Offensive to Me.[22] Sometimes it is really not about whether veil confines women or empowers them, whether it is forced on them or they chose it, or whether it is right or wrong for any other legal, humanistic or feminist reason. Sometimes, what the debate is really about is the fact that the hijab is an identity marker and a sign of belonging to the 'other' who will never be accepted. It is this attitude and this kind of hate speech that caused a huge increase in hate crimes against Muslims in the West to the extent that made Professor Zaki Badawi advise Muslim women not to wear hijab in the UK so that they do not come under physical and verbal abuse following the 7/7 attacks in London. Badawi was then head of the Muslim college in London, and chairman of the Council of Mosques and Imams. Interestingly enough, the anti-Muslim campaign resulted in exactly the opposite of what Badawi called Muslim women to do, and in what could be understood as an act of defiance to the maltreatment of Muslim people in the West, or maybe an act of self-assertion, the number of women adopting the hijab has increased alongside the increase of Islamophobia after the 9/11 and 7/7 attacks. As El Guindi associates the rise of hijab in Egypt and the Arab countries with the increasing frustration with governments and the increasing sense of disenfranchisement, in part one of *Human Rights and Religion: The Islamic Headscarf Debate in Europe*, McGoldrick reaches similar conclusions about the connection between the increase in wearing hijab in Europe and the Muslim youth's eagerness to assert their identity. In part two he discusses the interesting case of France where hijab-wearing increases despite the extreme anti-hijab sentiments there that were propped up by the ban on niqab. He also highlights a number of legal cases across Europe, in Germany, Switzerland, and UK, to name a few, where Muslim women went to the court to demand their rights to wear hijab and extreme forms of it, like the jilbab, in public spaces.

The new tense atmosphere of 'no to Muslims and no to hijab' on one side, and 'we will wear hijab and grow beards just to defy you' on the other side reached a new level when European governments decided to participate in this game. The legal battles and political battles ensued in Europe over wearing hijab, specifically wearing it in public places, and the debates continue about whether hijab is a personal freedom that Europe should respect or a threat to secularism that needs to be stopped before it gets serious. In France, face covering is banned in all public institutions and buildings. In Netherlands, Germany, Denmark, and Belgium there

[22] http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/opinion/columnists/matthewparris/article2044361.ece

are certain cases in which covering the face is banned, sometimes the ban is not all over the country but in certain cities and states within the same country- like in Germany- or in certain places like at passport control- like in Italy. (Nachmani 2010: 70-75)

The UK is much more tolerant and relaxed about hijab than the rest of its western-European neighbours. There is no law against hijab at all in the UK, and banning hijab has not even been brought forth seriously by politicians. Clashes over the hijab in Britain have so far been certain isolated cases at schools: 'Disputes rarely arise and when they do they are generally resolved within the institution concerned' (McGoldrick 2006: 177). The only exception was probably when a student called Shabina Begum went to the High Court against her school for not allowing her to wear the jilbab, and not hijab, and the jilbab is a long dress that conceals the shape and figure of the whole body except the hands and feet.

The most high profile comment by a politician was when Jack Straw, then an MP and previously a foreign secretary and a home secretary, publically said that 'wearing the full veil was bound to make better, positive relations between the two communities more difficult" and that this kind of veil is 'a visible statement of separation and of difference'. Even though he was not trying to suggest that any new laws should be made about hijab, and even though he only referred to the type of hijab that covers the face and not the one that covers the hair only, Straw's comments were widely criticised.

To sum up, the reasons and excuses used against hijab in Europe include arguing that it poses a threat to security, a threat to secularism and a first step on the path of implementing shari'a laws in Europe, an obstacle for communication and integration between people of different ethnic backgrounds within the same community.

There is the danger that the time, energy, and attention of feminists and human rights activists spent on the minor issue of hijab is reducing the time, energy, and attention required to tackle the plethora of more serious problems facing women. Not all Muslim women wear hijab, and not all hijabed women have a problem with it, so the issue of hijab is far from being a universal feminist issue. Domestic violence, however, is one example of the problems that are seen in all societies, in all religions, all races, and at all social levels. Of course, the list of feminist issues that are realistically universal is long, so prioritising the tasks for feminist and human rights activists is much needed:

> There is a strong sense in which the headscarf-hijab issue appears trivial beside many of the great political issues of the twenty first century and beside the range of fields where women can face grievous problems- education, health, domestic violence, and poverty. Indeed, some Muslim women are frustrated with the West's seeming obsession with the headscarf-hijab issue and take the view that it just needs to "get over it". (McGoldrick 2006: 12).

'Frustration' is probably the perfect word to describe how an independent and self-made hijabed Muslim woman might feel about a secular and liberal Western society that fixates on what she wears around her head more than the ideas she has inside it. A woman like this would probably believe at first that in societies where individuality and independence are very much celebrated she should have no problem adapting and blinding in no matter what dress code she adopts. Pamela K. Taylor describes her own frustration after she converted to Islam and decided to wear hijab. She talks about the discrepancy and gap between the premises and conclusion of the debate, what is meant and what is understood, the objectives and outcome of wearing hijab, in her article 'I just Want to Be Me: Issues in Identity for One American Muslim Woman'.

> I started wearing hijab... as a clear statement that I did not want to be judged by my body, my beauty, or the lack thereof, but as an individual, for my personality, my character, and my accomplishments. It was, for me, an unambiguous rejection of the objectification of women by men, by advertisers, by the beauty and fashion industries and Hollywood… My choice to wear a head scarf was, essentially, the most dramatic, proactive, feminist statement that I could make in my personal life, an in-your-face rebellion against the feminine mystique. (Taylor 2008: 120-121)

Although Taylor is talking about her experience in the USA, her country, I believe the ideas are valid and representative of a portion of the hijabed women in many countries including the United Kingdom. At least I could say from my personal experience that most of my hijabed friends either had the same reasons in mind when they adopted hijab, or at least agree with the idea that hijab is in a way a rejection of what they believe is the objectifying look at woman in Western media and fashion industries. But does the message that Taylor and hijabed women who share her views come across as it is intended?

> I had no idea of the battles it [hijab] would engender- battles that would echo my fight against the objectification of women- on the one hand a struggle to be seen as myself, rather than a symbol of women's oppression, and on the other hand, a struggle against being seen as a symbol of idealised faith or, conversely, self-righteous piety… I cannot help but feel the bitter irony of having swapped one form of objectification for another. (121)

Hijabed women are widely viewed as people on the same side with extremists. Worse, they are used, directly or indirectly, by those extremists to maintain and publicise certain images of Islam that those extremists believe in but the hijabed women involved do not. For example, sheikhs and imams would tell you that women should wear hijab because it is god's commandment and is a must in Islam, because it is the only way to prevent men from staring lustfully at women, and because woman is in her nature a *fitna* (temptation) so it is mainly her responsibility to control her sexuality by hijab. Many hijabed women would denounce all of those claims and assert that they wore hijab for reasons like Taylor's, or because they vowed it on themselves as a kind of spiritual aspiration and a personal spiritual relationship between themselves and God. This does not mean that the reasons sheikhs give to explain why women should wear hijab are not actually the real reasons why many hijabed women wear it, but there are many who disagree with those reasons and do not want to be associated with them at all, yet they *are* associated with them and with people who believe in them because sheikhs are more heard and have access to the media in order to spread their word around the world, unlike progressive and liberal Muslim women. This takes us back to the problem of people speaking for hijabed women rather than hijabed women speaking for themselves.

> Ironically, among the many objectionable opinions of political Islam… is the opinion that hijab is all about modesty, not about rejecting the objectification of women or about her demanding to be viewed on the basis of character, but rather about controlling sexuality, primarily alleviating men's sexual appetites. This belief posits that men's sexuality is wild, almost uncontrollable, that a woman who is not properly robed will create desire beyond proportion, and that therefore, the solution is to cover women, and keep them away from men. What a bitter pill! ... The very beauty I found in the hijab has been nullified, abandoned, supplanted by a reductionism akin to the one I tried to leave behind… American exploitation and Islamic modesty are flip sides of the same coin- one that damages women's self-esteem, endangers their health, and limits their choices in life. (124)

Such is the complexity of the issue of hijab, and such is the intensity of the debates about it. I cannot stress enough how far I am from including all the issues, debates, and clashes around it. I only tried to give an idea of how varied, sensitive, politicised, frustrating, and overwhelming this topic is for those who wish to study it:

> mostly, I don't think about hijab. I worry about wars, about women living in the shadows of oppressive regimes, about poverty and hunger, about unfair laws and wasted lives. And that, it seems to me, is the way it ought to be- all things in

> proportion. The hijab is, after all, just a scrap of cloth- a politically and emotionally charged scrap of cloth, but an article of clothing nonetheless. My energies are better spent making this world a kinder, safer, and more just place for all people. (128)

Hijab in contemporary British Theatre

The issues and debates of the hijab have found their way into contemporary British theatre, and although the topic of Muslim women, specifically the topic of Muslim women's veiling, is not very common in British theatre, yet it is no longer a rare event to find a veiled Muslim character on the stage. I am not interested here in the history of how Muslim female characters and veiled female characters have been represented in British theatre. My concern is with the way in which current debates and issues related to the hijab, within the context of current politics and cultures in the UK are being represented in contemporary British theatre. I have chosen two plays in which the hijab is a main topic, and I am going to look at how the many hijab-related topics are raised in these plays and how they have been tackled.

My choice of plays for this chapter are *Shades* by Alia Bano, first performed and published in 2009, and *What Fatima Did* by Atiha Sen Gupta also staged 2009. There are other contemporary British plays in which hijab is one of the major topic, like *Sisters* by Stephanie Street, 2010, and *Burq Off!* by Nadia Manzour in 2014. In the two plays I chose, however, hijab is not just a major topic, but it also functions as a dramatic tool to create a certain atmosphere and tension, and dramatic climax in the play. Both plays are written by young female playwrights who are British with Asian backgrounds; Alia Bano is British-born and her parents came to the UK Pakistan in the 1960s, Atiha Sen Gupta is also British-born, her mother is Indian-born and her father is half Sri-Lankan, half English. Bano identifies herself as a Muslim, and Sen Gupta, born and raised in East London, told me in an interview with her that she has a lot of Muslim influence in her life, from the big Muslim community in East London, her friends at school, and from her father in law. This is not to say that one necessarily has to belong to a certain community or live in it in order to be able to write about it, but living within or close to any ethnic community does give an insight into its traditions and customs, and this could facilitate the writers' attempt to pick and use some culturally-specific aspects of the community in their plays and present it with some nuance. It also helps the writers to

understand the complexity and sensitivity of the issues they are writing about. I go back here to Bhabha's words on cultural hybridity:

> If cultural diversity is a category of comparative ethics, aesthetics or ethnology, cultural difference is a process of signification through which statements of culture or on culture differentiate, discriminate and authorize the production of fields of force, reference, applicability and capacity. Cultural diversity is the recognition of pre-given cultural contents and customs, held in a time-frame of relativism; it gives rise to anodyne liberal notions of multiculturalism, cultural exchange or the culture of humanity. (Bhabha 1994: 34)

To apply these words to the case of the two writers I chose, I believe that Bano's and Sen Gupta's depiction of hijab in these two plays 'make statements one culture or of culture' and they are far from being an 'anodyne liberal' depiction of hijab in the UK. I believe the same applies to the way Stephanie Street and Nadia Manzoor depict hijab in *Sisters* and *Burq Off!* respectively, even though I do not use these two plays in this chapter for the reasons mentioned above. To avoid any confusion here, I do not think the four playwrights I have mentioned have some kind of exclusive right or authority to talk about hijab because they are Muslim or lived in a Muslim community, but I do think they make a valuable contribution to the dialogue about an issue like hijabbecause of the cultural richness they bring with them. In fact, in Bano's writing in *Shades* and another play I watched of hers, *Hens*, her lead characters seem to be mocking and trying to subvert the concept of speaking for the community, or representing the community and acting in a way that will preserve the honour and uphold the expectations of the community.

However, Bano and Sen Gupta have more reasons than just the neighbourhoods in which they grew up to claim to speak with some authenticity and originality in their plays. In an interview with Suman Bhuchar on *Theatre Voice* Alia Bano said her 'entire life has been leading on to *Shades'*[23] in the sense that she did not really have to do extensive research on the issue before writing the play as she has already been living it. In my interview with Bano I asked her if Sabrina, the main character of *Shades* had been influenced by her own personal life, and she answered 'a lot. So when people say to me "is this true? This can't be true." Well, it's true for me and true for people around me … In a way it was a microcosm of the world I inhabit.' (Bano 2012, np). Like Sabrina, Bano is a young Muslim woman who lives and works in London away

[23] http://www.theatrevoice.com/audio/playwright-alia-bano-on-hens-and-shades/

from her parents, she is single and has tried Muslim speed dating, and she does not wear the hijab. In the same interview, Bano said 'I tend to write about things that annoy me, or that I have questions about. If I don't know the answer I write a play to see if somebody can give me the answer.' (Bano 2012, np) So for Bano writing *Shades* was not a matter of writing about a subject that was highly topical and much debated, neither was it an attempt to celebrate the historic or cultural heritage to which she, or her parents, originally belonged. It was neither to claim the right to represent a community and a culture on British stages. For me *Shades* is an attempt to take the perception and the cultural debate and discourse on British Muslim women away from stereotypes, generalisations, and politics. It is an invitation to the audience to remember that a Muslim woman is an individual first, a female second, and British, Muslim, Pakistani or any or all other description afterwards. Sabrina in *Shades* is not the official spokesperson for British Muslim women, but a young girl in her late twenties who has an interesting story that is influenced by her Pakistani and Muslim heritage.

Atiha Sen Gupta likewise reflects on personal experiences from her life in *What Fatima Did*. She has been influenced since she was a child by the minorities' feminist movement in the UK because of her mother, Rahila Gupta, the writer, journalist, and activist in the Southall Black Sisters movement. Atiha was 4 years old when her mother started taking her to protests and marches, and she grew up watching her mother's activism and reading her writings, Atiha herself became a feminist. Yet the influence of Rahila Gupta is not the only reason why Atiha became interested in the issues of Muslim women, as part of the overall minorities' feminist movement in the UK. Two particular events fuelled her political perspective. In an interview, Atiha told me that she was insulted when she was 13 years old by a man on a bus who said 'she knows where Ben Laden is, she's a fucking Paki' (Sen Gupta 2012, np). She also told me about another incident that happened with her step-father who was called 'Ben Laden' because of his looks and his beard. Incidents like these have given Sen Gupta an idea about what people could go through on the basis of their appearance and the colour of their skin, and also made her develop a special interest in the issues of Muslim women. Sen Gupta's personal life experiences are also reflected in the main plot of *What Fatima Did*. At secondary school one of Sen Gupta's friends suddenly began to wear the hijab, and when Sen Gupta asked her why the answer was 'just because'. That friend became more and more distant and their friendship weakened since then (Sen Gupta 2012, np). The main plot of *What Fatima*

Did is about a group of students who come back to school after the summer break to find out that their best friend is wearing hijab. I will explore the plot and study the symbolism of some of Sen Gupta's writing decisions in detail later. For now, one could clearly see that, just like Alia Bano in *Shades*, *What Fatima Did* is also based on the writer's real life experiences, but unlike *Shades*, *What Fatima Did* is very political. In fact, one could describe this play as a dramatised debate, and here the attitude and opinions of the writer, and on what side she is become irrelevant in the reaction to and reception of the play. It now becomes an invitation to the audience and readers to take part of the political and social debate, facilitating it in a way that, due to artistic license, encourages more courage and openness.

Hijab and the structure and plot in *Shades*

Shades is a play about a young Muslim party organiser, Sabrina, who is in her late twenties and eager to find a husband. This makes the plot and the theme of the play seem simple, but the complications are introduced in scene two when Sabrina's flat mate, Zain asks her what she wants in a husband:

> **Sab** Just a normal guy.
>
> **Zain** There's plenty out there.
>
> **Sab** I just wish they were Muslim.
>
> **Zain** Stick to wanting diamonds.
>
> **Sab** I just want someone with pulse and a brain. And that's hard to find round here.
>
> **Zain** Just face it: you want to marry a white guy.
>
> **Sab** Marry a white guy when there's millions of Pakis about? My mother would just love that. (Bano 2009, 9-10)

Although we see in more than one incident in the plot that hijab is not the only problem in Sabrina's search for a Muslim husband, it is used as a symbol of what these problems are. Ali's questions and remarks to Sabrina in the Muslim speed dating in scene one are used to show us why exactly why Sabrina is not the ideal Muslim bride for a traditional Muslim suitor:

'n events organiser- Must be exciting, your job [...] So, you're a party girl [..] Perhaps another occupation might more suitable [..] You must work late at nights [..] Aren't you scared as a woman/ to- [..] Are you seriously looking? [..] How do you think your partner would feel about you working late? [..] How religious are you? [..] Do you pray? [..] Do you drink? [..] Have you ever been out with someone? [..] I just can't believe someone with your looks and dress hasn't-

Sab Hasn't what?

Pause. **Ali** *tries to choose his words carefully*.

Ali –attracted the attention of the opposite sex.' (5-7)

We gather from Sabrina's growing uneasiness and impatience with these questions that she has so many obstacles in her way if she would think of marrying a traditional Muslim man, but in scene two hijab is used in jest, and rather jokingly as a symbol of all she lacks as a perfect traditional Muslim bride, and what she needs to do to become one:

Zain look, when you hit thirty, just stick on a scarf. Your marriage rating would go up-

Sab Exponentially. (10-11)

However, when hijab is used again in the play to signify why Sabrina cannot marry a traditional Muslim man, it is this time an intense and a climactic moment, and not a light jest like in scene two. Sabrina becomes attached to Reza, a volunteer in a charity fashion show that she is organising. Although Reza's character is a bearded religious man who does not miss prayers, and he is a son of a preacher, yet in his interaction with Sabrina he is shown as a moderate Muslim who practices his religion as best as he could without being judgmental or patronising to Sabrina although she is so different to him and a very liberal Muslim girl. Quite opposite to this, he becomes attached to her. The first moment of climax in the play comes just after Sabrina acknowledges that she is falling in love with Reza. To wind Sabrina up because she is becoming closer and more intimate with Reza, Zain brings her a jilbab for a costume party they were supposed to go to. She does not enjoy the joke, and the mood becomes intense when Zain realizes that she really is falling for Reza and it is no longer a joke as he thought it is. This scene ends, after a very passionate confrontation with Zain because of her falling for Reza, with Sabrina seeing a glimpse of what future might be like for her:

'*The men exit. As the door slams,* **Sab** *walks back into the centre of the room and sits on the sofa. She picks up the hijab and looks at it. She puts the cloak and the veil in the*

bag, but hesitates when it comes to the hijab. She walks to the mirror with it in her hands and tentatively tries it on. She looks at herself in the mirror.

Blackout.' (50)

Hijab here is a stark reminder of what it means to Sabrina to continue her relationship with a religious Muslim man and what changes she needs to make in order to give this relationship a future. Because the situation is real and critical for her at this time, hijab as a symbol is not used jokingly or lightly, but we have an intense confrontation with it this time and Sabrina is having a moment of deep contemplation and consideration.

In the following scene the plot and goes in a different direction when Reza tells his best friend, Ali, that he intends to marry Sabrina. Zain's brutal honesty with Sabrina and his warnings about what Sabrina is getting herself into in her relationship with Reza, followed by the ominous hijab and mirror moment set a tense and serious mood and atmosphere in the play. However, Reza surprises his friend Ali when he tells him that he intends to introduce Sabina to his parents although he knows 'She's not what they would have expected' (52). This hopeful mood is short-lived though, and Sabrina meets Reza's sister, Nazia, in an a talk in an Islamic centre after we have seen Ali poisoning Nazia's mind with vicious lies about Sabrina hitting on him. Once again, hijab is present when there is a moment of conflict and tension. We know already that Nazia's sister instinct will set her firmly against Sabrina after Ali told her she hit on him and he 'had to push her off' him, and the way in which this expected antagonism happens is through a discussion about the topic of the talk they have all just attended, and that is hijab.

Nazia I was surprised by some of the views.

Reza It's healthy to have a debate, Bhaj.

Nazia The second speaker was –

Ali Asking women to take off their headscarf.

Nazia It's a bit much.

Zain I thought he had some interesting points. Finally, a *fatwa* not condemning someone to death. It'll be good for our image.

A dull silence. **Sab** *glares at* **Zain**.

Zain I was joking. (*An awkward laugh.)* If the *hijab* is making women targets for violence, then maybe they should consider removing it – for their safety.

[…]

Nazia You're right. I could never imagine taking off my *hijab*, whatever the circumstances. It's integral to a woman's identity as a Muslim.

[…]

Nazia What do you think, Sabrina?

Sab I have a lot of respect for women who wear it, but I think people can be just as religious without it. (57-58)

The debate on hijab here was used by Nazia and Ali to establish the fact that Sabrina and her friend Zain are very different in their thinking and adopt views that do not appeal to Reza's family and circles. After establishing that, they both move to pointing out and focusing on the other and more serious gaps between Sabrina's life style and values, and those of Reza and his family, mainly living with two guys who are not related to her.

The last time hijab is mentioned in the play is another climactic moment in scene twelve when Sabrina goes to Reza's office after he stops coming to the fashion show rehearsals and does not return Sabrina's calls, following the revelation he has about how distant he and Sabrina are in the hijab talk's night. The climax here is the concession that Sabrina shows she's willing to make to give their relationship a chance:

Sab (*struggling with the words*) If I wore the hijab?

Reza What?

Sab Would it make it easier?

Reza Sab.

Sab Would it make it easier? (Beat.) Would it?

Reza Yes.

Sab If that's what it takes then – [*I'll do it*]. (67-68)

Sabrina discovers then that the real obstacle is not the hijab. Because she lives with Zain and they are close friends, Reza and his sister make the assumption that they must have had a sexual relationship, and that is a taboo that Reza cannot ignore, fearing for his family's reputation in the community.

Neither Reza nor Nazia ever mention hijab as a reason why Sabrina is not the ideal wife to be for Reza, and their actual reasons for thinking that are not related to hijab at all. However, hijab (or headscarf) is mentioned four times in the play, and in each time it introduces an element of distance, conflict, or tension between liberal Muslims represented by Sabrina and Zain, and traditional Muslims represented by Reza, Ali, and Nazia. In scene two hijab is used to reflect the shallow look at a woman as a body that needs to be covered, before being considered decent enough to be a good Muslim wife. Scene nine gives a strong insight, through the symbol of hijab, of how difficult it is for the two worlds of Sabrina and Reza to meet, and that in order for this gap to be bridged Sabrina is the one who needs to change and make compromises. In scene eleven the topic of hijab is used to pave the way for a session of scrutiny and superior moral judgments against Sabrina, and this session succeeds in changing Reza's mind, temporarily. Finally, in scene twelve hijab is shown as a sacrifice that Sabrina very bitterly makes in order to be with the man she loves. The way the plot goes on after this scene confirms that hijab is not really the issue. After Zain exposes Ali's reality to Reza and tells him that he tried to seduce Sabrina while at the same time trying to convince Reza she is not the right one for him, Reza goes to the fashion show to see Sabrina and takes his parents with him to meet her. This difference between what the hijab's structural function in the play and between its actual role in Sabrina and Reza's relationship in the plot could suggest that Bano is critiquing the way hijab is perceived and thought of in Muslim communities rather than criticising hijab itself. To paraphrase her words, she might be asking questions she cannot answer about hijab through this play, and the question here might be: is hijab really a dividing issue between liberal and traditional Muslims, or is the division actually due to the excess of moral values that some Muslims attach to hijab, or the excess of phobia others have about it, and how both excesses lead to prejudice and negative stereotypes about hijab and women who do or do not wear it? One could look at the depiction of hijab in this ply from a different angle ad problematize the writer's use of hijab as an issue that causes friction in the play even though the plot and the characters that Bano herself created do not support the concept that hijab is a significant problem.This in a way says something about how highly charged with emotions and controversy hijab is for the Muslim community in the UK that it is almost inevitable for its representation on stage to be anything but problematic and conflictual, even if the dramatic context of the play does not lead us naturally in that direction.

The Dramatic Function of hijab in *What Fatima Did*

The topic and plot of *What Fatima Did* are more clearly and directly about hijab than the topic and plot of *Shades*, but whereas in *Shades* it is the presence of hijab in the plot and dialogue that signify some sort of change of mood or a climax in the play, as I have argued earlier, in *What Fatima Did* it is the presence of the hijabed character that plays that role. This play starts with a group of 17 year olds in their classroom on their first day back at school reunited for the first term after summer. They are ethnically a mixed group, all British but from different backgrounds: Mohammad is Indian, Aisha is Pakistani, Craig is Jamaican, Stacey is Trinidadian, George is Irish, and the teacher, Ms Harris, is English. The mood in scene one is light, and we enjoy a funny and entertaining chat between these teenagers, and it is only towards the end of the scene that we get a glimpse of what the plot of the play is about, and what the issue is going to be:

> '*STACEY comes back in.*
>
> **STACEY**: I just saw Fatima guys!
>
> *MOHAMMED immediately sobers up but GEORGE is not aware of anything and carries on the antics.*
>
> [...]
>
> **STACEY**: She's different. Tell them, Mo.
>
> **MOHAMMED**: Sit down Stace.
>
> **STACEY**: She's Muslim.
>
> *AISHA, CRAIG, and GEORGE start cracking up.*
>
> [...]
>
> **STACEY**: I don't know how to call it… but she's become a ninja… in the Muslim way. She's wearing that thing… on her head.
>
> [...]
>
> *There is a single knock on the door. The door opens slowly.*
>
> *The CLASS (apart from MOHAMMED) catch their first sight of FATIMA for six weeks. A collective intake of breath, audible.*
>
> **STACEY**: I told you…
>
> *Lights down.*

End of Scene. (Sen Gupta, 2009: 18-20)

This is the first time Fatima, the character that wears a hijab, is introduced into the plot and action of the play, and this presence immediately interrupts the light and fun mood of the play and replaces it with a tensed and awkward mood. I am saying 'introduced into the plot', and not 'appears', because we never see Fatima in the play. This is the title character, and throughout the play almost all the dialogues between the other characters that are about Fatima, but she is never seen or heard. For now I just want to establish why I am talking about the character's *presence* rather than *appearance* before I continue discussing the function of this presence in the plot, and I will analyse the significance of why we never see or hear Fatima in this play later.

We know, either from stage directions or the dialogue between characters, that Fatima is there and is taking part in the scene, and this happens six times in the play. In the first time, as I mentioned earlier, Fatima's presence stops the fun that the other characters are having. This first happens to her twin brother, Mohammed, who is the only one who understands why Stacey looks surprised that she saw Fatima. He can now foresee the imminent tension and awkwardness that will ensue when the rest of the class will also see her in her new look. In scene two Fatima's best friends are confused about how to actually deal with her after she has adopted the hijab. They wonder whether she stopped drinking alcohol as they used to do, but they are not prepared for the awkward conversation if they ask her if she is drinking or not, so they try to find out by tasting her drink while she is away:

'**AISHA**: (*Lifting FATIMA's glass.)* Let me taste-

STACEY: She's coming. Shit. Quick.

AISHA drops the glass and looks up.

GEORGE enters followed by a vexed looking CRAIG and a calm MOHAMMED.

CRAIG: (We join the boys' already started conversation.) … We can't leave you for two minutes to take a piss… Where's Fatima?

GEORGE: Gone.

CRAIG: What does that mean?' (30)

This presence of Fatima is immediately followed by details about the first fight her boyfriend George has with her. In this second presence of Fatima, and unlike the first one, we do not

have a sudden switch in mood from relaxed and happy to tense, because we feel from Aisha and Stacey's conversation earlier that the mood is already awkward and tense. The tension increases after Fatima's quick presence, and we see the friends argue among each other and fall out because of what has just happened between Fatima and George. The young and usually liberal teenager has changed, and this change is making her group of close friends nervous and unable to cope with her and her new identity. They are, some directly like George and some indirectly like Aisha, telling the new Fatima with her new identity whether they are willing to accept her as one of them or not. The group seems to be only harmonious and tight-knit provided that all members conform to similar attitudes to life. Hijab is new and different to what the group is used to, and we are starting to feel from the language and atmosphere that this difference might threaten the unity and harmony of the group.

So far Fatima's presence shifted the mood from light and happy to tense in scene one, shrouded the atmosphere in tension in scene two, and now this presence starts scene three with confrontation and clash. The scene starts with Rukhsana, Fatima and Mohammad's liberal single mother who is militantly against the hijab, and Mo in the kitchen in what we can infer is the aftermath of a huge fight between Rukhsana and Fatima, whose footsteps we can hear as she goes upstairs:

> *Rukhsana is chopping onions on a work surface. There is a bottle of wine by her and a glass in her hand which she finishes drinking and slams down.*
>
> *MOHAMMED stands watching her from the door.*
>
> *The sound of footsteps clunking up the stairs can be heard and then a door is heard slamming. Footsteps directly above the kitchen are quietly audible.*
>
> **RUKHSANA**: (*Shouting*) … Can you believe what she said? Can you believe that she would actually say that to me?
>
> [...]
>
> **RUKHSANA**: I asked her why she was doing it. What's the point.
>
> **MOHAMMED**: Right.
>
> **RUKHSANA**: And you know what she said? She said, 'because'. Fucking because. (*Shouting to the ceiling*.) What does *because* mean? (36)

This is our first encounter with the mother and we learn from it how fiercely she is against her daughter's hijab, and that she is even ashamed about it. We also learn from the following

conversation between Rukhsana and Mohammed that she is a single mother who fought her ex-husband 'tooth and nail when he casually brought it up in conversation- that maybe I should dress with a little bit more "modesty". I slapped him in the face, that's what I did.' (37)

Contrary to expectations, this play shows the younger generation adopting traditional and conservative choices, and the older generation fighting it. Sen Gupta subtly brings the political and ideological to our attention in this debate on the hijab, rather than the religious and cultural elements of the hijab issue. A stereotypical perception of the hijab is that it is either something forced on women or is a result of systematic brainwashing or indirect coercion by family and community[24]. The different levels of the issue that Sen Gupta is bringing to the debate and asking us to discuss are ideological, political, and generational. Sen Gupta's decision to characterize the mother as liberal and the daughter as the character who is going back to tradition and to something that can be considered as an ideological identity marker reflects a tendency among young British Muslims to cling on to a past and a homeland and home culture that they never experienced. It is what Salman Rushdi assimilates to the broken pot that is discovered in an archaeological site. In its reality it is nothing but a broken pot, but the fact that it is related to a time that we reminisce about makes it a national treasure. Likewise, second and third generation immigrants romanticise certain practices that are related to the culture and homeland that they have never seen. (Rushhdi, 2010: 11-12) Rushdi also attributes more nostalgic tendencies among second and third generation immigrants than first generation immigrants to the fact that they did not live what their parents/grandparents may have escaped, and that is why they only have the beautiful image of their country that they get from stories told by parents and grandparents, or from visits every now and then. The old generation, on the other hand, have a more balanced attitude towards their home land and home culture. They remember the beautiful things they lost, and the difficult situations they escaped. Sen Gupta touches on this in her characterization when she makes Rukhsana an ardently anti-hijab character. There is probably a reference there to the generation of Asian women who fought hard in the 1970s and 1980s for their

[24] I have already established in the section on Islamic Feminisms the new-liberal concept of 'freeing Muslim women from their hijab' which is based on the assumption that hijab is forced directly or indirectly on women. I also refer to some Arab-liberal stereotypical anti-hijab sentiment in the section on 'Hijab Debate in Muslim Countries' in this chapter.

rights, and Sen Gupta's mother, Rahila, has been a key member of that movement through Southall Black Sisters.

I will discuss this gap between younger/older generations and their attitude towards culture, religion, homeland, and Britain further in chapter three where I argue that the constant feeling of being a minority might also be a reason behind why some young Muslims cling on to cultural practices and identity markers that one would expect the young and the teenagers would usually avoid.

In scene four George is in the girls' toilet at school thinking that Fatima is there, but instead he finds Stacey- who has a crush on him and wants him for herself. George tells Stacey how the night before he tried to speak to Fatima and she ignored him, then when she said that she was feeling hot, and with the anger he was already feeling about the whole hijab issue, he took it off her head, and this resulted in Fatima stating on her Facebook page that she was no longer in a relationship. Just like in all the previous three scenes, Fatima's coming into the scene again brings further complications and rifts in the relationships in the group:

> *STACEY opens her arms to GEORGE. GEORGE goes towards them and lets himself be hugged, STACEY is enjoying this. She kisses his cheeks.*
>
> *The main Girls' Toilet door open and FATIMA walks in- we hear the DOOR swing open widely, but she is out of sight.*
>
> *GEORGE looks up and sees her. He initially smiles and then becomes aware of the situation.*
>
> **GEORGE**: It's not what you think. Fatima. (*Beat, calling loudly after her and leaving the same way Fatima did.*) FATIMA!
>
> *Lights down.*
>
> *End of scene.* (45)

After this ominous situation, the action in the following scene becomes much more serious and problematic. We see Mohammed and George fighting over the incident of ripping Fatima's hijab off, we see George bleeding, and Ms Harris tells George that Fatima 'made a complaint of racial harassment' against him. The situation escalates from tension to enmity and confrontation. Craig and Aisha decide to throw a birthday party for Mohammed and Fatima hoping that they could make George apologise to Fatima and become friends again with her and Mohammed, but George instead comes to the party dressed up as St George.

Obviously, St. George is a Christian and English icon, and George has clearly decided to counter Fatima's decision to embrace her Muslim identity by embracing what could be considered as a counter marker of identity. His decision and timing are clearly aimed to provoke Fatima and Mo. After seeing George's costume Aisha and Craig become very worried that Fatima is about to arrive and see it. Her expected presence becomes, again, ominous of more confrontation and further complications of the problems the group already have. However, in this scene the sense that the attitude towards Fatima with her new identity, rather than her presence, is what might be causing the confrontation and enmity. Mohammed walks in before his sister, and he immediately understands the message behind the costume and George's intent:

> ***MOHAMMED's*** *eyes fall on GEORGE and his COSTUME.*
>
> Is this a joke? (To his back.) Fatima go wait by the door.
>
> **AISHA**: We can explain.
>
> **MOHAMMED**: I take it that's a no, then? I knew this would be a piss take.
>
> *MOHAMMED makes to walk out.*
>
> **CRAIG**: Wait, bruv. Just wait.
>
> **MOHAMMED**: For what? To be insulted? (Beat.) To be called a fucking Muslim again? (83)

Once again, Sen Gupta is suggesting a different angle from which to look at the issue of hijab. If hijab isolates British Muslim women, is it always them who are isolating themselves? Could it be that the attitude towards them that assumes they are making an anti-British statement by wearing the hijab, and then reacting to them and to their hijab accordingly, is why they find themselves isolated? The symbolism is not subtle in this play; St. George's figure and the St. George cross flag have been used by the National Front and the BNP to rally Christian White English people around their cause and their message that England should only be White and Christian. This kind of symbolism that is very direct supports further my description of the play as a dramatised debate. Sen Gupta again seems to be more interested in encouraging the political debate about hijab, identity, racism and bigotry, than she is interested in the artistic aesthetics of the play.

The last presence of Fatima, which is also the very last scene in the play, plays a different role than the one it plays throughout the play. There is no more tension or confrontation anymore, but there is something that might have even more negative implications. It is the last day of the school, and after we see the friends enjoying it together in the previous scene- without George who apparently leaves the school after the incidents at the beginning of the year- we are now in front of Fatima's room and George comes to collect his things and say goodbye. In what sounds almost like a soliloquy talking to Fatima's door and lamenting the love and friendships he lost this year, George tries passionately to trigger any response from Fatima, but in vain:

> Is that it then?
>
> *A long silence.*
>
> *GEORGE, exhausted, exhales deeply and starts to get up. He looks at the DOOR a final time and puts his right palm onto it.*
>
> I just came to say goodbye.
>
> *GEORGE walks away.*
>
> *A moment too late.*
>
> *Just as he leaves the stage, FATIMA's door starts to open slowly.*
>
> *LIGHTS FADE.*
>
> *END OF PLAY.* (95)

It is as if this final scene and this final presence of the hijabed character are meant to imply the impossibility of meeting, of dialogue, and of reaching some common ground with regards the hijab debate in general. There is an assertion of the idea of distance in this final scene, and it signifies the absurdity of a situation in which two sides of a certain cultural conflict or debate realise too late how much they hurt themselves and others by the attitudes they take. Again I say this situation of hopelessness and late realisations is probably more sad and pessimistic than the situation in which frictions and conflicts take place because of interaction between people with cultural differences.

After studying the significance and the role that the presence of the character of Fatima played in the play, I need to study the significance and implications of choosing not to show this character on stage at all, and not even to let her voice be heard. The concept of visibility

and invisibility is a crucial one when studying the phenomenon of hijab in society and culture. I talked earlier in this chapter about the contradictory concepts of visibility/invisibility of the hijabed woman in a strict Muslim community and in a Western community through the two examples of American writer Pamela K. Taylor, and American Pakistani writer Maliha Masood. Whereas Masood enjoyed invisibility after she wore hijab during her short stay at a traditional neighbourhood in Cairo, a step which spared her a lot of scrutiny when she used to walk around without hijab, Taylor's hijab in the USA brought exactly the opposite response to her; she felt singled out for wearing it in a non-Muslim society, and found a lot of attention that she did not necessarily asked for (Taylor and Masood in Heath 2008). A woman who wears a hijab in a Western society is making a statement, albeit probably unintended, which inevitably brings a lot of attention to her whether she asks for it or not, and it also gives her a new identity: a hijabed woman! Fatima does not need to have a face or a voice, she only needs to be the hijabed character, and this in itself reflects a lot of the attitudes towards Muslim women who wear the hijab in the UK and in western societies in general. Sen Gupta could be holding a mirror to the British and Western societies to show them how they really look at hijabed women and how media represents these women. There is a simplified category of 'hijabed women' under which all the women who wear hijab are moulded in mainstream Western media and culture.

On the other hand, the mirror could also be held for hijabed Muslim women who feel a certain impulse that pushes them to isolate themselves from their surrounding only because they have adopted the hijab. Indeed, tolerance and acceptance is a two-way street, and if sometimes the non-Muslim societies are not as embracing of Muslim women as they should be, Muslim communities in the West as well, in many cases, do not open up to the big societies in which they live. This is sometimes because people who belong to a minority group get sucked into a discourse that repeatedly tells them that they are victims and that the majority around them will never accept them, and when you accept this rhetoric without questioning it and without building your own experience it is easy to become unnecessarily defensive, seek solidarity with others who belong to your minority only because they do belong to this minority, and feel unjustified enmity towards the others. The hesitant and slow, and, most importantly, late opening of Fatima's door at the end of the play probably reflect this idea of walls that Muslim communities and hijabed women sometimes build around

themselves unknowingly or unthinkingly. The final possible meaning of the absent main character could be a direct criticism to hijab itself, and indeed in my interview with Atiha Sen Gupta she told me that as a woman and feminist she thinks 'hijab is oppressive... It is not just a piece of cloth. It invisibalizes women, so that also feeds into why Fatima is not there.' (Sen Gupta 2012, np) Sen Gupta also acknowledges the other implications of the absence of Fatima, she says 'I think dramatically it became the conceit, and that is what worked, and I can't imagine the play where Fatima was *in* the play because in a way it's about what the hijab means to everyone else in the play; the mother, the brother, the boyfriend, the friend, the teacher. It's very much the Western idea of all those different parts of Western society and what they're saying about the hijab, and they're feeding into each other' (Sen Gupta 2012, np). This is a reminder of how a piece of art no longer belongs to its author once it leaves privacy of their mind and becomes public; each member of audience and each reader gives a piece of art a new meaning when they interpret it. This is also a reminder of how varied and manifold any debate about hijab could be, and regardless of whether or not Sen Gupta intended to reflect that or just wanted to express her own opinions about hijab, this play does reflect the diversity and complexity of the cultural debates on hijab. Fatima then is in a way not a character but a topic; Sen Gupta transforms her only hijab-wearing character into an issue that we look at it from all other angles except the angle of a hijab-wearer herself. If we consider Sen Gupta's characterization decisions, and then think about women like Masood and Taylor who put on a hijab or take it off in order to avoid conflict and debate, one then goes back to what Sen Gupta says that hijab 'invisibalizes women' and wonders if it is really hijab that causes invisibility or it is actually the societal attitudes and prejudices that cause it.

Both *Shades* and *What Fatima Did* use hijab effectively to create dramatic effects and shift the atmosphere of the play. The scenes with hijab in *Shades*, and the scenes with the 'presence' of the character in hijab in *What Fatima Did* are very suggestive and insightful. They all work in different ways and present different perspectives –they move the audiences' sympathies from one position to another through the articulation of points of view and symbolism they evoke. The conclusion I have drawn from the stage directions and the careful reading of the moments right before and after the presence of hijab in the two plays is that the hijab is used to symbolize the intensity, the sensitivity, and the social and political charge within the topic of British Muslim women's experience. Even when the hijab is not directly

the topic of *Shades* per se, it is used to symbolize the topic of the clash ormeeting between conservatism and liberalism in the lives of young British Muslim women. The easy and stereotypical way to visually represent a Muslim woman on mainstream media is always to show a woman in a hijab, and the two playwrights have adopted this icon, but they played with the concept and created out of it a variety of meanings and significations.

Chapter Two

The Position of Women in the Muslim Family

Introduction

In *Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction*, Rosemarie Tong quotes fellow feminists Alison Jaggar and Paula Rothenberg who give five reasons to explain why they and other feminists believe that 'women's oppression is the most fundamental form of oppression.' (Tong 1989: 71) One of these five reasons is that 'women's oppression is the most widespread, existing in virtually every known society.' (Tong 1989: 71) It is very hard to find someone who could refute this claim and suggest that there is a society where women do not worry about equal rights, fair representation in politics, domestic violence, rape or any of the many ways in which women's oppression happens. However, it is easy to suggest that the degree of women's oppression, and the shape and type of this oppression differs from one society to another, and there are many reasons to claim that some societies are more female-friendly than others. In fact, *The Independent* published an article in 2012 in which it defined certain categories and factors to designate the worst and best places in the world for women.[25] Some of the categories are: best and worst places for women to be a politician, a journalist, a senior manager, and the best and worst places to give birth, get an education etc. None of the categories used in this kind of survey can really give us a good insight into the position of women inside the family in any of these societies. The high percentage of successful women in politics, business, arts, or any other discipline does indicate positive approach to the issue of equality between genders in the laws or in the culture of the society, but it tells us very little about whether or not the woman is equal in the family or not.

Afghanistan fared worst in the *Independent*'s survey, and few more Muslim countries featured in the 'worst countries to be a woman' part of it. Apart from statistics, numbers and

[25] http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/politics/revealed-the-best-and-worst-places-to-be-a-woman-7534794.html

surveys though, Muslim women are the ones who have been most frequently singled out by mainstream Western media as the most oppressed group of women, Islam has been repeatedly blamed for their oppression and considered an anti-woman religion. Of course, there are many political factors that contributed to this stereotype, and I will talk more about this in chapter three.

Jagger and Rothenberg's concept of the universality of women's causes is never more true than in the very domestic sphere of family. In chapter one I studied the hijab, which is a predominantly Muslim phenomenon- although one could argue that hijab is one variant of the bigger feminist issue of woman's dress code. In this chapter I am looking at the position of the woman in the Muslim family, and here I expect to find a lot of common ground with the position of woman in any other patriarchal society. I will try to study how four major factors have contributed to the determination of the position of women in the Muslim family. These factors are: being a mother, economic independence, law, and female sexuality.

Being a Mother

Looking at the feminist writing on women within the family, there is a remarkable congruence between Western second wave feminists like Betty Friedan and Germaine Greer, and between Egyptian feminists like Nawal El-Saadawi. More interestingly, the issues that these three feminists fore-grounded in the 1960s and 1970s remain very relevant today. For me, this comparison between Western and Middle-Eastern approaches to the issue of the position of woman in the family- especially as a mother- that came about around roughly the same time will help me establish where patriarchy is universal and where it is practiced in different levels and methods, and why. I will further support this point by another comparison between two approaches to the same issue in the UK from two distant periods of time.

An essential problem for a woman in her family within patriarchal society is her subordinate position to the man. In the hierarchy of her family the mother not only comes in second place after the father, but it is also extremely important that the father's first place and the mother's second place must be emphasized and maintained, and the family needs to always be reminded of those positions. In *The Feminine Mystique* Betty Friedan noted the way that

American women magazines in the 1950s and 1960s emphasized the necessity of the father's leadership in the family:

> For the sake of every member of the family, the family needs a head. This means Father, not Mother… Children of both sexes need to learn, recognize and respect the abilities and functions of each sex… he is not just a substitute mother, even though he's ready and willing to do his share of bathing, feeding, comforting, playing. He is a link with the outside world he works in. If in that world he is interested, courageous, tolerant, constructive, he will pass on these values to his children. (Friedan 1986: 43)

The specific magazine Freidan is referring to in the quotation above is *McCall's*, Easter edition 1954, and it is but an example of the wider post-World War II USA, an era of closing down of opportunities for women in the public sphere. The magazine, and the general capitalist mainstream media at the time, adopted a very common belief in patriarchal societies, which is that women's responsibilities are exclusively inside the house and men's are outside. If the father contributes and takes part in the physical part of raising children like bathing them or playing with them then it is almost portrayed as a bonus that he offers ever so generously to his wife, but in fact the main thing he needs to do to fulfil his part of raising children is to be successful in his work and relationships outside home. Although this set up and this delegation of responsibilities between parents might be reasonable and acceptable for so many mothers, yet Friedan notices that it was so much propagated by women's magazines, and in the media and the American capitalist culture generally, to the extent that it eventually established a norm and an image for the perfect family and the perfect wife. Women are likely to lose their agency in this system, and their ability not to conform to the established image of family and wife that comes with it.

To perpetuate the established image of the happy family and the good wife and to protect it from rebellious women who might not accept it, the patriarchal propaganda went on to attack women who waste their men's time with housework and child-minding: 'Why, it was asked, should men with the capacities of statesmen, anthropologists, physicists, poets, have to wash dishes and diaper babies on weekday evenings and Saturday mornings when they might use those hours to fulfil larger commitments to their society?' (42)

There seems to be a pattern in American capitalist media outlets that whenever there is a momentum in the feminist movement in one way or another there will be a surge in the propagation of the necessity of men leading the family and society. Fast forward from the

1963 when Freidan wrote *The Feminine Mystique* to the 1990s and we can notice the pattern emerging, for example, among American sitcoms. The best example would be *Every Body Loves Raymond*, one of the most popular sitcoms of the 1990s. Throughout the nine seasons of this show the position of woman as a housewife and man as a bread-winner is reasserted, the wife's attempts to break that pattern and either get the husband to take part in raising the children, or trying to establish an independent social or professional life outside her role as a mother were always comically thwarted, and most importantly, she always comes herself to the conclusion that things are better the way they are at the end. Moving forward to the current day and Fox News, one of the most popular TV channels in the USA has been for years now incessantly repeating the rhetoric that there is wave of what they call 'wussification of men,' which basically means that feminism and its call for equality strips men of their masculinity in a way that is dangerous to family and society. One contributor to Fox News went as far as claiming that this is dangerous for the national security of the USA.[26]These examples from popular culture and propagandist media might seem insignificant or too extreme or comic to be taken seriously, but they contribute indirectly to the normalisation of certain concepts about women who do not conform to traditional norms. Gradually, the residual effects of such culture play part in the lives of women within their families, especially mothers. As Greer puts it, 'non-conformity is intolerable' in patriarchal societies where people not only conform to established roles but also try to push others to do the same.

The clearest evidence on how capitalist societies systematically unfair to women in the work place is probably the pay gap between genders. This is especially significant when knowing that the major reason for the pay gap is argued to be maternity. According to Equal Pay Portal, which is a website that uses official government data and statistics to analyse gender pay gap, women aged 22-29 in the UK 'are paid on average slightly more than men. From the age of 40 upwards, the gap is much wider, with men being paid substantially more on average than women.'[27] The report goes on to conclude that the time women take off work to look after their children is the main reason for this difference in pay gap at this age group. A 2015 article in the Guardian voices out the frustration with the government clear unwillingness to seriously address the issue of the little support working women receive after giving birth: 'the

[26] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Q2geG7MXVU
[27] http://www.equalpayportal.co.uk/statistics/

chancellor of the exchequer said recently that mothers who stay at home to look after their children are making a lifestyle choice, as if it were on a par with nudism or polyamory.' (Gambotto-Burke, 2015)

One can see then that in the capitalist society the political-economic system, the media, and other methods of creating public opinion and perception work hand in hand to make women's position at home as 'common sense'. This applies to the UK, USA or any other Western capitalist society today, but it has had special poignancy at the time Freidan and Greer's books were written because it was the time when capitalism was being consolidated as an undisputed and final choice for how the West will be run. Second wave feminism was standing in the way then, and therefore its concepts of equality between men and women needed to be countered by assertion on the necessity and inevitability of prioritising motherhood for women.

Greer also talks about the 'smother' who is a mother that cannot draw the line between loving and care for her children and between controlling them. Greer argues that this type of mother exists when the woman is confined to her home and to her prescribed roles. This mother becomes socially crippled and finds value and significance only within the family. (Greer 1970: 225) A man could let his imagination go when thinking about his career options and how his life should go, whereas a woman cannot think very creatively about her future; she is going to be a wife and a mother and so she ends up being melted into the family and her roles in it. As one woman interviewed for Friedan's book puts it: 'The problem is always being the children's mommy, or the minister's wife and never being myself'. (Freidan 1986: 25) Friedan points out two main problems for women in this: firstly the role of housewife, as important and time-consuming and physically demanding as it is, yet it actually poses very limited mental challenge for the woman so she inevitably feels unsatisfied with her life. Secondly, when the rest of the family move on with their lives and are no longer with the mother all the time the mother will feel a big void in her life and forget what it means to have time for herself. She will become unable to function alone:

> I always have this idea we should do everything together. I can't sit down and read a book alone. If the children are napping and I have one hour to myself I just walk through the house waiting for them to wake up. I don't make a move until I know where the rest of the crowd is going. It is as if ever since you were a little girl, there's

> always been someone or something that will take care of your life... Then you wake up one morning and there's nothing to look forward to. (19)

Another society that has seen sudden and drastic shifts towards capitalism is Egypt in the 1970s. After two decades of socialist policies under Jamal Abdul-Nasser, president Anwar El-Sadat suddenly switched to the right in 1973 and imposed capitalism in Egypt. He also tried to use and manipulate religion to consolidate his rule, and to make his wager on the new alliance with the West instead of the Communist bloc work.[28] In a book first published in the 1970s, Nawal El-Saadawi makes the case that the dangerous mixture of capitalism, or even more importantly sudden capitalism, and religious conservatism has intensified patriarchal attitudes in Egypt. (Saadawi 1990, 77-79)

In her analysis of family relationships in patriarchal societies, El-Saadawi offers a linked understanding of the children's attachment to their mothers. She believes that far from being an innate part of womanhood, the attachment to mothers is due to the fact that the children are raised almost completely by their mother. The mother too is more attached to her children because she has nothing else in her life but her family and her home, so she compensates for the lack or absence of any other interest in her life outside the family by attaching herself too much to the family. Saadawi considers this relationship to be an unhealthy form of love: 'Activeness is one of the conditions of true love, whereas romanticised love is a sick and passive love. It is a deprived love that feeds on deprivation and reactions.' (112)[29]

Patriarchal societies try their best to convince women of the opposite, that their sole and ultimate purpose *is* to be a mother, and that anything that distracts from this, like a career, is unnatural and unfeminine. Women have been told that part of their 'feminine mystique' is that the woman dedicates herself to being a good mother and wife. (Freidan 1963, 38) The concept of the romanticised passive love that Saadawi talks about, which makes a woman always happy to sacrifice herself for others, and Freidan's concept of the feminine mystique that teaches women dedication to all but herself, are very similar to the roles and images that

[28] Anwar El-Sadat's political experimentation with using both capitalism and religion to consolidate power and silence leftist opposition has, however, cause his death as an Islamist member of his armed forces assassinated him in1981.

[29] All the direct quotations by Nawal El Saadawi are translated from Arabic by me. The original direct quotations in Arabic are all in appendix 4.

archaic Islamic preachers and jurists have prescribed for women from medieval times. In *Polygamy and Law in Contemporary Saudi Arabia*, Maha Yamani recounts the rhetoric that Islamic preachers have used since the 12th century to justify polygamy for men. For these preachers women are sexually passive in their nature, while men are active; women are naturally subordinate and men are leaders, and so women's natural purpose is to serve man in his home. The similarities in the attitude and rhetoric of the 12th century extremist Islamic preachers from Arabia that Yamani quotes and the 20th century journalists from the USA that Freidan quotes are striking.

Economic Independence

Most feminists agree that economics is one of the most influential and direct factors in women's experience of patriarchy. As I have explained in the introduction of the thesis, Saadawi believes that the reason human societies moved from being matriarchal to patriarchal is underpinned by economic factors. Early human societies, Saadawi suggests, used to have women at the centre because they were considered the guarantors of continuity and survival through birthing and motherhood, as land and livestock became central to early economy, the male ability to improve these assets placed them at the centre of family and society. (Saadawi 1990: 64-65) Saadawi argues that patriarchal societies have always tried to confine women to their homes and let the man to take control of economy. Economics then is the final step that consolidates man's control over woman, because even if a woman manages to overcome the emotional and ideological reasons for her subordinate role in the family, she still cannot realistically become independent unless she can support herself financially:

> One of the methods of oppressing women is to strip her not just of her biological, social and moral agency, but also her economic one, in order to be dependent on man in everything. That is why she has been stripped of her right to work and get paid for her work, so that she will be economically dependent on the man. She has only been allowed to work at home serving the man and the children for free, and so she has no other shelter but the man, no matter how much humiliation she receives from him. (Saadawi 1990: 239)

To successfully push women away from work, the patriarchal society had to create a positive image for the housewife, and a negative one for the career woman. Women have been told that having a career is masculine, while being a mother is feminine. Throughout *The Feminine Mystique*, Freidan shows multiple ways in which women magazines in the USA in the 1950s-1960s echoed this pitting of career against home-making. (Freidan 1986)

Media is then a very powerful weapon in the face of women's independence, but another very efficient weapon is other women, especially mothers. Because they are born and raised in a society that teaches them that their survival is dependent on men and on adhering to the rules of society, mothers believe that they protect their daughters when they teach them to follow the traditions, and even impose and force these traditions themselves. Saadawi argues that due to the deep subconscious fear of the repercussions of any attempt towards liberation, and due to centuries of oppression, some women have confused their deep fear of breaking the rules with a love to these rules 'and that is the reason behind the extreme panic that mothers feel (even more than fathers) when they spot any move towards liberation from their daughters, and that is why the daughter hates her mother... because she tries to pull her into the limited and ugly world of women that smells of garlic and onion, washing dishes, and isolation from the intellectual and cultural life of the big world.' (Saadawi 1990: 256-257)

At this point I want to offer the second comparison between patriarchal attitudes in two different societies. This time the comparison is made by British feminist Laurie Penny, and it is between the British society in the 19th century and the 21st century:

> Susan B Anthony never married. The suffragist, abolitionist and civil rights campaigner foresaw in 1877 that "in women's transition from the position of subject to sovereign, there must needs be an era of self-sustained, self-supported homes," leading "inevitably, to an epoch of single women". Seven generations later, we may finally have arrived. More women are living alone or without a partner than ever before, and the question on the table once again is not how to have a better marriage, but whether to have one at all. (Penny 2016)

For Penny, marriage is a form of exploitative labour that is intended to keep women indirectly in servitude and subordination to men, due to the fact that they are in charge of the domestic and emotional responsibilities in the family, whereas the man is more in control of his personal development in life. Penny says that opting out of the conventional marriage and

nuclear family options has enabled her to explore her options in life fully, but she points out that in a capitalist society that is dependent on women's position at home 'The possibility of millions of women making the same decision, en masse, however, is an entirely more threatening prospect.' (2016)As radical as Penny's concept of 'dismantling the social and economic institutions of marriage and family.' is, she reflects in her article the disillusionment of so many women with the conventional methods of delegating responsibilities in the family between men and women. The women that Penny's article speaks for stopped believing in, or succumbing to the pressure of how important it is for women to continue the reproductive cycle. Instead, they see that by opting out of marriage and nuclear family they simply get out of unfair working conditions.

Anti-Female Laws

What I hope I have established in the previous two sections and introduction to this chapter is that patriarchy goes across cultures, nationalities, and religions, especially when it comes to the position of mother in the family, and the subtle ways in which economic control over women is achieved. The question that follows now is, why is it that although in their core concepts and reasons patriarchal values are almost identical across cultures, they differ significantly in the extent to which they are actually practiced between one society and another? In other words, even if we accept that American, Australian, British, and Egyptian patriarchs share very similar attitudes towards women's roleyet is it safe to say that the Egyptian patriarchs do exercise and live by these attitudes more than their Western counterparts? The distinction between societies can be drawn in one word, Law. Many patriarchal and even misogynistic practices are legally protected in a country that has a shari'a, or shari'a inspired law- and we learned from Maha Yamani in the introduction of the thesis that there are countless different versions of shari'a laws. In this section I will look at how law in Muslim countries and Muslim communities in non-Muslim countries allow and sometimes encourage patriarchal and misogynistic practices. One example I will start with here is Syrian Personal Status Law, which regulates affairs of the family, like marriage, divorce, and inheritance. Items 105-112 of this law give five specific and exclusive acceptable cases in which the wife can divorce her husband:

1. The husband is sexually impotent.
2. The husband became mentally unstable after marriage.
3. The husband disappears for no declared reason for prolonged period of time, or if the husband receives a jail sentence for more than three years, in which case the wife can divorce him after one year of that sentence passes.
4. The husband fails to provide for his family even though he is proven to be financially able to provide for them.
5. The husband harms his wife and the wife can provide evidence of this harm.[30]

The husband, on the other hand, needs to say the words 'I divorce you' or 'you are hereby divorced' three times and then goes to the court to register the divorce and then the divorce takes place with no reasons or justifications required. A wife who does not want to live with her husband any longer cannot get divorced unless he grants it, except in the very specific five situations mentioned above. As discriminatory as this law is, the actual practice of it in reality could be much worse. In a documentary called *Divorce Iranian Style*, Ziba Mir-Hosseini follows a number of legal cases in a family court in Iran, and we see examples of how women who seek divorce, or women who got divorced but are seeking their custodial and financial rights are pressurised to give up some of their rights to get others.[31]

In a paper on the genesis of Islamic family and gender rights laws, Mir Hosseini points out how the tradition of patriarchy in Islamic jurisprudence comes mainly from classical jurists between the 12th-16th centuries, not from the Qur'an. She quotes these jurists who describe marriage as 'a contract whose object is that of dominion over the vagina, without the right of its possession.'(Mir Hossein in Anwar 2009: 29) Similarly, marriage is described as 'a kind of slavery, for a wife is a slave to her husband. She owes her husband absolute obedience in whatever he demands of her, where she herself is concerned, as long as no sin is involved.'(30) Mir-Hosseini's careful analysis of the rulings and fatwas these jurists offer in issues related to gender rights and family laws are based mostly on the traditional social norms of the eras when they were written, and only marginally based on Qur'anic verses or Hadiths that are taken out of their historical, social and political contexts and read and

[30] http://www.syrianbar.org/index.php?news=167
[31] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PCe1o-Hg2OY

interpreted in accordance with the cultural norms of the time and place where those jurists lived.

The big problem for progression and reform in Islamic family and gender rights laws is that 'Islamists and Muslim traditionalists claim that they [classical jurists] are divinely ordained, that they embody the *Shari'a* conception of marriage and gender rights, and thereby invoke them to legitimate patriarchy on religious grounds.'(32)

These rulings are thus social, traditional, regional, and archaic, but when those revered jurists infused them into their religious fatwas, Mir-Hosseini argues, they 'were sanctified, and then turned into fixed entities of *fiqh* [jurisprudence]. That is, rather than considering them as social, thus temporal institutions and phenomena, the classical jurists treated them as "divinely ordained", thus immutable.' (33)

This idea explains why these norms are relevant even in countries where the law is secular and family laws are supportive of women. Regardless of what the law of the land does for women, many Muslim women will be bound by practices that they believe are part of their Islamic identity. It is not just the law, as important and key as it is for the rights of women, but in the case of women who are devoutly religious or living in a family or a community that is devoutly religious, another part of the solution will have to be a brave and open cultural debate about the practices that are considered integral parts of the religious identity. What does not help Muslim women in countries where they are a minority, like the UK, is for that debate to be silenced in the name of cultural sensitivity, and for the so-called community elders, who are in most cases male traditionalists, to be allowed to decide what is a cultural taboo and what is not. In the name of multiculturalism, some misogynistic practices have been allowed to happen and flourish in the UK and the West, mainly as a result to cooperation and consultation with self-appointed community leaders. One of the manifestations of the problem in the UK is shari'a courts. In an episode of BBC Two's *Panorama* episode on *Secrets of Britain's Shari'a Councils*, some serious anti-woman practices were revealed in some of Britain's shari'a councils, including pressuring women who were beaten by their husbands to continue living with them and not report the beating to the police. In many public discussions about the issue, there have been calls for banning shari'a courts and shari'a councils. This, however, is very unlikely to solve the problem of inequality between men and women in the

Muslim family because of the sanctity and fixity of the Islamic family and gender rights laws that Mir-Hosseini talked about. If the physical existence of shari'a courts is banned in the UK, a Muslim who believes in the divinity of the above mentioned laws will still seek a sheikh to grant her an Islamic marriage, divorce, inheritance, etc. Cassandra Balchin talks about the Canadian experience between 2003-2005 when there were attempts to introduce shari'a councils, activists resisted them with 'advocacy through meetings and seminars; a deliberate claiming of women's right to interpret religion and a process of self-education; and an emphasis that this was a women's issue, beyond the question of religious or cultural identity.' (Balchin 2009: 228) I still doubt that a blanket ban of shari'a courts in any non-Muslim country is a solution because as anti-female as it could be, it could also be the only source of support for a woman who chooses to have a religious marriage without a civil one alongside it. The Canadian activists' method of combating shari'a courts, however, is the best way forward to educate Muslim women in the West about their rights under both civil and Islamic laws, which is a knowledge that could save them the need to use a shari'a court in the first place.

The regressive nature of family laws in Muslim countries is also a modern political problem, and not just an ideological problem that emerged in medieval times. Balchin lists a number of cases where the state used the anti-feminist card for short-term political gains. Women's rights and family laws have so often been used as a punch bag by governments, political parties, and Islamist and nationalist groups who have tried to garner popular support through playing the role of the protector of decency and modesty in society, or identity of the nation. The examples that Balchin mentions include the Algerian government's regressive personal status law of 1984 that aimed to counter accusations from the Islamist opposition that the government is steering the nation away from Islam, the Bangladeshi government's inaction against village councils who executed their own extreme version of Islamic law throughout the 1990s, and similar threats and declinations in women's rights in Senegal, Gambia, Uzbekistan, the Philippines, to name a few. (225-226) This is not only a Muslim problem though, as Balchin also talks about howthe Maronite Church in Lebanon joined forces with the Islamic leaders to stop plans for a modernised marriage law that allows Mulsim women to marry Christian men, and in India in 1986 'Feminist reform efforts were hampered by the existence of a Hindu fundamentalist government which raised the fear that any uniform code would essentially mean imposing Hindu laws on minority communities.'(227) Today in the

USA, feminist issues like the right to have abortion are at the heart of political debate, and one only needs to watch any Republican presidential debate to see the candidates competing in who is more firm on denying the women the right to abort, even in cases of rape and in very early pregnancies.

Balchin also points out that the regressive gender rights and family laws are not only caused by local politics, but also caused by Western imperial interventions in other countries:

> Introduction of regressive family law reforms in the name of nation-building and recognition of identity seems particularly characteristic of post-conflict contexts where resources are few and there is a lack of will to prioritise women's rights or include them in negotiations under UN Resolution 1325 (on peace, women and security). The recent regressive changes in Iraqi family law are an example. In post-conflict Sierra Leon (60 per cent Muslim), international development assistance has revitalised traditional and largely women-unfriendly adjudication systems. (226)

Sexuality of Muslim Women

Patriarchal societies have always tried to control women's sexuality much more than they tried to control men's sexuality. Some societies though, including Muslim societies, have put so much value in the control of the sexuality of their female members that they linked their sexuality with the honour of the society, the family, and each individual of the female's family. This is by far the most dangerous kind of control because most of the crimes that are committed against women, including murder, are driven by this concept of the female's sexuality and the male's 'honour'. The badly coined terms of 'honour crimes' and 'crimes of passion' are used to refer to crimes committed by people, mostly men, who believe that a member of their family, mostly a female, has transgressed against the established rules of behaviour, especially sexual behaviour. Purna Sen suggests that honour crimes have six key features:

1. Gender relations that problematize and control women's behaviours, shaping and controlling women's sexuality in particular;
2. The role of women in policing and monitoring women's behaviour;
3. Collective decisions regarding punishment, or in upholding the actions considered appropriate, for transgressions of these boundaries;
4. The potential for women's participation in killings;
5. The ability to reclaim honour through enforced compliance of killings;

6. State sanction of such killings through recognition of honour as motivation and mitigation (Sen 2005: 50)

Hannana Siddiqui is an activist in the Southall Black Sisters, a group that fought for the rights of women in minorities in the UK for decades, and she argues that any discussion about honour killings should be included in the general discussion about domestic violence. (Siddiqui 2005:275) The danger of not doing so is that society and authorities could be ignoring the roots of honour killings and failing to act before it is too late. In fact, Siddiqui offers an overview of government and government-supported initiatives in the area of protecting women in minority groups here in the UK, and concludes that the state has failed those women. (267-269) One of the reasons for the failure might be that the traditionalists in the minority groups have successfully linked the debate about protecting women in these minorities with the debate about multiculturalism and tolerance. Siddiqui says that 'Southall Black Sisters (SBS) have, for many years, argued that cultural defences are used by men from minority communities to justify violence against women in the name of religion and culture.' (263) This manipulative discourse used by those who defend honour killings and domestic violence, directly or indirectly, and the fact that the government and law enforcement apparatuses in this country do take this discourse into account has created 'The dangerous and shifty grounds on which black and minority women have to raise issues of gender violence.' (274) The two dangers of mixing the debate on respecting minorities' cultures and the debate on women's rights are, according to Siddiqui, that it gave criminals who used the 'cultural defence' reduced sentences, and that it interrupts the efforts for improving minority women's rights for fear of insulting cultures and religions.

The question I will try to answer now is why is this problem, although cross-cultural, more visible and recurrent among Muslim communities? To answer this question, Fatima Mernissi looks at the root of the problem, which is the Islamic attitude towards women's sexuality. She starts by comparing the attitude towards women's sexuality in Western-Christian societies, and in Muslim societies: 'In societies in which seclusion and surveillance of women prevail, the implicit concept of female sexuality is active; in societies where there are no such methods of surveillance and coercion of women's behaviour, the concept of female sexuality is passive.' (Mernissi 2000: 22) Mernissi says that in Christianity, especially in Catholicism, sex in general is considered a sin, even between husband and wife, unless it is for the purpose of

procreation. In Islam, on the other hand, the attitude towards sex is positive and even encouraging, as long as it is marital sex, of course. This positive and encouraging attitude does not apply equally to men and women though:

> In Islam… what is attacked and debased is not sexuality but women, as the embodiment of destruction, the symbol of disorder. The woman is fitna, the epitome of the uncontrollable, a living representative of the dangers of sexuality and its rampant disruptive potential. … Sexuality *per se* is not a danger. On the contrary, it has three positive, vital functions. It allows the believers to perpetuate themselves on earth, an indispensable condition if the social order is to exist at all. It serves as a "foretaste of the delights secured for men in Paradise", thus encouraging men to strive for paradise and to obey Allah's rule on earth. Finally, sexual satisfactory is necessary to intellectual effort. (32-33)

Early Islamic religious literature, including the Hadith, acknowledged women's sexual power, warned against it and called for tough controls over it. This acknowledgement is buried in the subconscious of Muslim societies despite the fact that it manifests itself in the sexual dynamics in the Muslim community. Mernissi explains the conscious and subconscious levels of traditionalist Islamic attitude towards female sexuality:

> Muslim society is characterized by a contradiction between what can be called "an explicit theory" and an "implicit theory" of female sexuality, and therefore a double theory of sexual dynamics. The explicit theory is the prevailing contemporary belief that men are aggressive in their interaction with women, and women are passive. The implicit theory, driven far further into the Muslim unconscious, is epitomized in Imam Ghazali's classical work. He sees civilization as struggling to contain women's destructive, all-absorbing power. Women must be controlled to prevent men from being distracted from their social and religious duties. Society can survive only by creating institutions that can foster male dominance through sexual segregation and polygamy for believers. (23)

The first theory- 'the explicit theory'- mirrors the general perception of women and their sexuality in patriarchal cultures in general, Muslim and non-Muslim alike. In fact, Mernissi compares the writing and theories of a representative of this theory, Abbas Al-Aqqad, and the writings and theories of Freud on women. Al-Aqqad is an author, novelist, poet, journalist and politician who wrote extensively in the first half of the 20th century, including a book entitled *Woman in Qur'an* published in Cairo in 1959. Contrary to what the title suggests, this book consists of Al-Aqqad's own opinions and theories about the topics related to women that are mentioned in the Qur'an. It is hard to see any real dependence on the Qur'an in this book, but the influence of Freud and of the popular patriarchal narratives about women is clear:

> What Aqqad finds in Qur'an and in human civilization is complementarity between the sexes based on their antagonistic natures. The characteristic of the male is the will to power, the will to conquer. The characteristic of the female is a negative will to power. All her energies are vested in seeking to be conquered, in wanting to be overpowered and subjugated. Therefore, "she can only expose herself and wait while the man wants and seeks... Like Freud, Aqqad endows women with a hearty appetite for suffering. Women enjoy surrender. More than that, for Aqqad women experience pleasure and happiness only in their subjugation, their defeat by males. The ability to experience pleasure in suffering and subjugation is the kernel of femininity which is masochistic by its very nature. (23-24)

This theory explains and reflects the superiority that men in patriarchal societies feel towards women, but it does not help explain the obsession with covering the woman, secluding her at home, and minimizing her physical sexual abilities through the practice of female genital mutilation. One explanation given to why women, although sexually passive, have to cover up is to protect them from the over-sexualized men. Some people respond to this claim by saying that 'Preventing women from showing themselves unveiled expresses men's fear of losing control over their minds, falling prey to *fitna* whenever they are confronted with a non-veiled woman. The implications of such an institution lead us to think that women are believed to be better equipped in this respect than men.' (Amin in Mernissi 2000: 22)

Mernissi does not think this narrative provides logical explanation of men's obsession with controlling the female body. What explains this obsession is the 'explicit theory' about female sexuality which believes that the female sexuality is actually too great and powerful that it needs to be controlled. To clarify this idea further I will explain the word 'fitna' that comes across repeatedly in Mernissi's paper. 'Fitna' is an Arabic word that could mean infatuation, seduction, disorder, or could mean all three meanings together. Woman is often referred to as 'fitna' in Islamic literature, and Mernissi quotes a number of Hadiths in which woman being 'fitna' could mean all three meanings at the same time:

> The prophet saw a woman. He hurried to his house and had intercourse with his wife Zaynab, then left the house and said, "When the woman comes towards you, it is Satan who is approaching you. When one of you sees a woman and he feels attracted to her, he should hurry to his wife. With her, it would be the same as with the other one.' (Al-Tarmidi in Mernissi 2000: 31)
>
> 'When a man and a woman are isolated in the presences of each other, Satan is bound to be their third companion.' (Al-Tarmidi in Mernissi 2000: 31)

> ‘Do not go to the women whose husbands are absent. Because Satan will get in your bodies as blood rushes through your flesh.’ (Al-Tarmidi in Mernissi 2000: 31)

It is important to mention here that, as I explained in the introduction of the thesis, many Hadiths are forged, and some of the Hadiths mentioned above could be weak or untrue, but they are nevertheless widely used and accepted by many Muslims, and they are, true or false, part of the traditionalist mainstream Islamic perception of women and their sexuality. Woman, and her sexuality, is repeatedly associated with Satan, disorder, and female sexuality is the opposite of purity. This goes as far as saying- and this is not a fringe belief- that shaking hands with a woman in Ramadan could break your fasting, since in Ramadan you do not just fast from food and drinks, but also all your worldly desires.

Arranged or forced marriages, and the insistence on the female’s virginity till marriage are two methods of controlling female sexuality, and they are also two main reasons behind violence and crimes against Muslim women. One common reason behind the crimes against Muslim and Asian women in the UK is when women reject arranged marriages (Siddiqui 2005) Another common reason of ‘honour killings’ is if a bride was not virgin on her wedding night. In fact, Saadawi recounts a practice in rural areas in Egypt where the wedding party does not end before the mother of the bride proudly displays to the guests a piece of blood stained white cloth that proves that her daughter was virgin and has just been deflowered (Saadawi 1990). Forced marriage is often used to hide the family’s shame when they find out that their daughter has had a relationship (Carroll 2000: 245) and in Syria many families would try to hide the shame of their daughter losing her virginity before marriage (or sometimes even the shame of being seen publically with her lover) by meeting with the family of the young man and arranging a quick marriage. In some cases the police would mediate the proceedings and they will give a young man who deflowered a teenager, even if he himself was a teenager, the choice of either marrying her or going to jail.

Mernissi finds an interesting psychological link between the obsession with virginity and the general political, economic and social state of a nation: ‘Like honour, virginity is the manifestation of a purely male preoccupation in societies where inequality, scarcity, and the

degrading subjection of some people to others deprive the community as a whole of the only true human strength: self-confidence. (Mernissi 2000: 203)[32]

Needless to say, the responses within Muslim families in the UK to a female member transgressing rules about sexuality and modesty vary greatly, and honour killings or forced marriages to complete strangers in Pakistan, for example, are extreme cases. However, the general perception of sex outside marriage as a major taboo in Muslim communities would probably play on the mind of a Muslim daughter even in decent families that could never use violence or forced marriage with their daughters. Firstly, a Muslim daughter who transgresses social rules on sex and does not fear for her life or freedom may still worry about ostracism, if not by her family then by her wider Muslim community, and secondly, the community's scrutiny may make her feel the guilt of bringing shame to her family. There are, then, many

[32] I find this link between the lack of self-confidence in the men of a certain society and their obsession with the women's virginity very interesting, especially when I think about another interesting link that is repeatedly made in Arabic literature between the collective lack of self-confidence and sexual dysfunction. The most famous example is the Egyptian movie *El Noom Fi El Asal* (Sleeping in Honey), one of the most successful Arabic dark comedies in the 1990s. In this movie, a detective investigates a series of crimes and incidents including a groom who kills himself on his wedding night, a man who kills his wife, and another man who destroys a brothel and beats the prostitutes. The detective discovers that all three men could not perform sexually, and their behaviour was a response to their sexual frustration. Similar incidents happen on a large scale across the city of Cairo- this time including women fighting their husbands because they cannot satisfy them- and when the detective runs his theory that there is some sort of epidemic by his boss, the high ranking powerful man dismisses the detective's claims saying that his own libido is fine and that only the night before their meeting he managed to have sex three times. Failing to get the authorities to acknowledge the phenomenon and tackle it, the detective himself starts suffering sexual dysfunction, and the movie ends with all the frustrated men of Cairo taking to the streets in a protest where they are faced by anti-riot police. This is only one example, but the theme is very common in many Egyptian, Lebanese and Syrian plays, movies, TV dramas and satire comedies. I am trying here to extend Mernissi's theory about the psychological connection between economic and political depression and the patriarchal obsession with controlling a woman's virginity. My idea is that the political and economic depression lead to a general decline in the moral and spirit of people- represented in Arabic culture in the form of sexual dysfunction- and this could be another subconscious reason why men in such societies feel the need to compensate for their political and economic helplessness through asserting their control over their women's virginity; that they must be the conquerors of their women's hymens.

barriers, emotional and otherwise, that face a Muslim daughter when it comes to sexual liberty.

All the factors I have studied come together to collectively influence the female in the traditional Muslim family who feels much more pressure than the male to act in compliance with the norms and traditions, and treads carefully when she examines and tests her possibilities outside or on the borderline of these norms. Moreover, these norms and traditions put great pressure on the man in the Muslim family as well, especially the father. Tradition and expectations are so important in the Muslim community, and the so-called Islamic laws on gender issues have so much sanctity as we discovered earlier that many fathers apply them fiercely either out of fear of social ostracism and shame, or of being bad Muslims who failed to carry out their responsibilities. There is such a fusion in Islamic religious literature between patriarchal practices and religious duties that it could be difficult sometimes to determine when is the man just enjoying the privileges of being a male in a very patriarchal society, and when he is being burdening himself and his family, especially the female, with customs that he does not believe he can transgress himself.

I have started this chapter by saying how Muslim communities have the reputation of being extremely masculine and even misogynistic, and then discussed the reasons why in some cases the extreme practices that are associated with Islam, rightly or wrongly, are so visible in Muslim communities. I will look now at three British plays that depict some of the issues of and problems of a female in the Muslim family, but do this with some nuance and more depth than simply portraying a Muslim male tyrant and a Muslim female victim.

The three plays I choose for this chapter depict the issues I have discussed so far about the workings of patriarchy and how it affects the lives of Muslim women and Muslim families in the UK. The three plays go beyond the stereotypes of helpless obedient wives and powerful and tyrannical fathers, and instead offer nuanced look at how specific manifestations of patriarchy in the Muslim family in the UK take place, why and where they come from, and how they continue or stop in different scenarios and circumstances. *East is East* looks at the myth of father as the undisputed leader of the family, and how this concept burdens the father as well as the mother and the children. *Deadeye* looks at economic in/dependence and career outside home as a main factor for women to take control of their lives. *Sweet Cider,* a

play that is informed by the writer's own difficult experience of living in a teenage refuge, offers an emotional account and insight into the experiences of young British Muslim girls who defy their families' norms about sexuality and morality, and their families' quest to claim ownership of their daughters' bodies and lives.

East is East

East is East was first produced in 1997, and is probably the most famous British Muslim or even British Asian play, partly because it was adapted to a movie in 1999. The play was produced again at the end of 2014 at the Trafalgar Studios where I went to see it before it toured in 2015. In an interview in *The Guardian* in 2009, Khan-Din says that the play is autobiographical and the characters are based on his Catholic English mother, his Pakistani Muslim father, and their ten children including himself. Khan-Din says about his father: 'My father may have married an English woman, but he expected us to be good Pakistanis, foisting religious ideals on us that he hardly observed himself. I loved him, but he was a hypocrite.'[33] Having known previously that the play was based on Khan-Din's own life I was very excited about the news that he was going to play the father, George. I was curious to see how the writer-actor was going to perform his own father whom he did not portray favourably in this play. In personal discussions with friends and colleagues about the original *East Is East* production, and the movie, a number of them expressed uneasiness with what they thought is a stereotypical characterisation of George as an angry and tyrannical Pakistani. I personally have always thought that there is a lot of nuance and roundedness in this character and that it is not simply a character of an angry and ruthless Muslim Pakistani man. It obviously is a character of a tyrannical and angry Pakistani father, but it also shows the roots of where this characteristics come from.Khan-Din's rendering of the character confirmed that for me. We see George cry twice in the play, the first time comes after an argument with Ella that ends with her telling him 'if Pakistan is that great why did you leave it?', Ella immediately regrets that and tries to apologise, but her words resonate with George, so he leaves to the shop and cries, not knowing that his youngest, Sajit, has come in and has seen him weep. The second

[33] http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2009/oct/21/east-is-east-ayub-khan-din

time George cries is after his fight with Ella after she insults the guests who were supposed to marry their daughters off to her sons. George, confronted by his wife and his children too, feels that he has lost control, and his anger turns into frustration and loss. George is not the character of a man enjoying the privileges of being the patriarch of the family, but a man who is imprisoned by the notion of having to exercise his patriarchal duties, and even failing at doing that.

This play is the only one in the eight plays that I study in this thesis that is written by a man, and this gave it a special focus as it shows us the perspective of male victims of patriarchy, namely here the father (although this might be controversial since he is also the victimizer) and the two sons who are being forced into marriage. We do not see the two sisters who are going to marry the two brothers, but we see the Khan family trying to control their shock and laughter when they see their pictures, thus suggesting to the audience that they are ugly. This places the audience's sympathy firmly with the boys, the male victims of forced marriages, instead of the girls who are usually the more obvious victim of this kind of marriage. In a way, this play does have a significant and unique feminist contribution, which is that it brings to the attention and the discussion that patriarchy and misogyny is not just anti-female, but anti-male as well, even though its effects on the female is much more serious and visible.

The character of the mother, Ella, is very complicated and rounded too. Here we have a woman who throughout the play appears to be strong, confident and in control over her household, smokes even though George hates it, does not hold back in arguments with him and often wins them, and she even runs the family chip shop business. Yet we see her taking the subordinate role and avoiding confrontations whenever George decides something important about their children's lives. When she can, Ella will try to get her way when she does not agree with George, but she will not oppose him openly. When George finds out Sajit is not circumcised Ella acts surprised, but she actually is not:

> **ANNI.** (*checks to see* GEORGE *has gone*). You bleeding knew about Sajit didn't you?
>
> **ELLA.** I did, but it had gone right out of me mind, he was supposed to be done, but the hospital cancelled it 'cause he got flu. George never found out, and what he didn't know wouldn't hurt him.
>
> **ANNIE**. You knew he'd find out sooner or later you daft sod.

ELLA. Oh yeah, and when was the last time you saw George washing a baby or wiping a shitty arse? You know Saleem had such a hard time of it when he was done, I don't think I could have listened to another one of 'em screaming in pain.

ANNIE. Mm. Now you're gonna have to. (Khan-Din 1997: 8-9)[34]

This however is a very minor example of the mother's fear of facing the father and standing up to him for her children's sake. From a number of dialogues in the play we learn about Nazir, the eldest son who left the house and is banned from coming back because he defied his father and rejected a marriage that was arranged for him. What George learns from this experience is that he needs to be even more firm and tough with the rest of his boys, so when he plans to marry two of them off to two daughters of a Pakistani acquaintance of his, he only tells his wife a few days in advance and does not tell the two sons involved of his arrangements. When the sons accidentally discover their father's plans their anger is directed at their mother because she did not warn them and fight for them. She has no answers for them when they confront her, and she feels helpless and doubts herself as a mother:

ELLA. Annie … Do you think I'm a good mother?

ANNIE. What sort of bleeding question's that. Course you are. What's put that in your head?

ELLA. Well would you have put your lads through this?

ANNIE *doesn't answer.*

ANNIE. You had no choice.

ELLA. I did though Annie, I should have put me foot down and said no.

ANNIE. And given yourself a load of bleeding grief, you know what he's like.

ELLA. I know, but now he wants to marry Abdul and Tariq off. Am I just to stand by and let him throw them out when they say no?

Pause.

ANNIE. Have they said owt to you?

ELLA. Abdul won't talk about it, I think they blame me for not sticking up for them. I only found out myself the other day.

[…]

[34] I am using the direct quotations from the play from the play text, but I am depending in performance analysis on the performance I have watched at Trafalgar Studios on the 20th of December 2014.

> **ANNIE**. You're a good mother to those kids and a bloody good wife to him as well, but you're in the middle Ella, you have to keep your head down. (42-43)

Not only is the character of Ella well-rounded because it subverts the stereotypical image of the subordinate wife and mother as weak, but she also complicates the easy stereotypical presumption that Muslim women are submissive to their husbands *because* they are Muslim. Here we have a conversation between two English women accepting what they believe is the inevitable subordinate role of women in the family to keep the peace and avoid the wrath of the man.This is a play written by a male Muslim writer, and looking at the feminist issues that are raised in this play from a male perspective offers a fresh and unique insight to these issues. I believe Khan-Din has provided us with two characters that enrich any feminist analysis of the play: a victimised woman who is a very strong character, and a victimizing man who is actually a very vulnerable and fragile character. Khan-Din's play acknowledges patriarchy clearly, but it looks at it from a man's perspective, and this challenges easy and stereotypical approaches to the father's leadership and the woman's subordination in many patriarchal Muslim families. It is neither Islam nor weakness that make Ella a victim, and it is not Islam or a desire and the joy of exercising power that make George a victimizer.

Khan-Din's treatment of the issue of arranged/forced marriage is another example of him offering a man's perspective on an issue that is usually discussed in feminist writing. The main plot of the play is about two of the Khan boys who are about to be forced into arranged marriages they do not want. We know in the play that the eldest son has already left the family home and is ostracised from it because her refused an arranged marriage, and this is the father's second attempt to force his sons into marriage. However, when the prospect of Meenah, the only daughter, being forced into marriage is brought up by Annie, Ella quickly brushes it off by suggesting that Meenah is strong enough and will not be forced into anything. One way of looking at this would be that Khan-Din is intentionally focussing on the idea that patriarchy in the Muslim family hurts men as well, not just women. He probably is not interested in discussing the issue of girls being forced into marriage because it is a topic that constantly appears in representations of Muslim women in theatre and in media, but he wanted to direct his audience's attention to the other casualties of forced marriage that are men. A different reading into Khan-Din's concentration on the plight of the boys alone could be simply that he has failed to go beyond male-oriented writing and male gaze. What could

support this interpretation is the fact that the two Shah girls that the Khan boys are supposed to marry are reduced to two framed photos that are brought by the Shah parents. We do not see the photos in the frames, but Ella's facial expressions of shock and the giggles of Meenah and Annie when they see the photos suggest that the girls are ugly. Not only are the girls not represented on stage and their plight of arranged marriage completely ignored, but also the fact that they are made ugly to a shocking/funny degree from the point of view of the Khan family serves to confirm the victimization of the Khan boys on the expense of the Shah girls who are objectified, laughed at, and later mocked by Ella when the Shahs criticise her son. Khan-Din might be focussed on his own unique concept of the negative effects of patriarchy on men in this play, but in doing so his representation of some of his female characters proves problematic. Having said that, this example has made me realize that in all the plays I read or watched that talk about forced marriage from a female perspective, men who are likely to be forced into the marriage as well are either absent or negatively represented. In *Sisters* by Stephanie Street and in *Burq Off!* by Nadia Manzoor the girls are threatened by forced marriage to a relative from Pakistan because they transgress against their fathers' commands one way or another, so the men in the forced marriage are reduced to a mere threat and a tool for punishment. In *Blood* by Emteaz Hussain, the brother tries to force his sister to marry his friend, and that friend rapes the her. In a way, regardless of the problematic representation of the Shah girls in *East is East*, and whether Khan-Din ignores the girls' perspective of arranged marriage because of his male-centric approach or to draw more attention to the other side of the story, arranged/forced marriage in *East Is East* opens up the discussion about the representation of the issue and enriches it.

Deadeye

Deadeye is a co-production between Kali Theatre and the Birmingham Rep, written by Amber Lone and premiered at the Birmingham Rep in 2006. The play centres around Deema, a smart young woman in her twenties who is the most reliable person in the family, and who has a decision she needs to make: does she carry on with her career plans that entail her moving from her parents' home, or does she stay at home to continue being the glue that holds the family together?

The father, Rafique, is someone who always day-dreams about big projects and about becoming rich and having a big house in a farm. He keeps checking luxurious houses in the Peak District but the reality of his life is that his house is about to be repossessed because of his accumulating debt. Zainab is a typical Asian housewife who does her best to care for her family, but her word is never respected by her husband. Tariq is Deema's brother who is totally dependent on his family, including his sister, and is a drug addict. He loves his sister and respects her, but he is stuck in his addiction and cannot break out of it. To complicate things further, he is in debt to the drug dealer, who happens to be a beloved acquaintance of the family, yet he threatens Tariq and Deema when Tariq fails to pay his debts.

Rafique's latest project is doomed to fail, and it frustrates his wife greatly:

> **RAFIQUE**: You didn't see? Recipe book, 'Easy Meals in a Hurry'.
>
> […]
>
> **ZAINAB**: Is that bacon?
>
> *ZAINAB flashes a picture of a traditional English fry-up*.
>
> **RAFIQUE**: Ghaureh [white people] have to eat as well.
>
> **ZAINAB:** There must be.
>
> **RAFIQUE**: Five hundred.
>
> **DEEMA**: Five hundred books?
>
> […]
>
> **ZAINAB**: Who will buy bacon photos in this area?
>
> **RAFIQUE**: Don't be so narrow-minded. These are modern times Zainab. There are recipes for sandwiches, salads, soups. All the forward-thinking young girls will want

them. In a few months our troubles will be over… I have calculated it… five hundred times ten equals five thousand. I give half to Mahmoud and half I keep… then I will order more from Khan Sahib and only then.

ZAINAB: These are English books. Nobody on this street speaks English.

RAFIQUE: You have learnt nothing from living in this country for thirty-five years.

ZAINAB: Who is going to pay your stupid money and who will give their husband egg and bacon sandwich? (Lone 2006, 36-37)

Just like Zainab expects, the books fail to sell and they keep occupying space in the house and the garden. Zainab trips over the boxes and feels unable to walk or cook in her house because of them, whereas Rafique does not see any problem: 'RAFIQUE: So much space in this house and you're moaning over few boxes.' (34) In a way these boxes start to symbolize Zainab's life in general; they remind her of her dysfunctional family, her stubborn and incompetent husband who is directly responsible for their economic situation yet insists on living his day-dreams and disrespects his wife. The books also represent her helplessness and lack of options and control over her own life. This all eventually comes to a boiling point for Zainab:

DIMA: There's no way to put them.

ZAINAB: He is going to sell them.

DEEMA: To who? They're crap.

ZAINAB: (Still pushing.) Allah is going to help him.

DEEMA: You can't lift that.

ZAINAB: I want them away.

DEEMA holds ZAINAB's arms.

DEEMA: I'll get Tariq to do it with me.

ZAINAB: He can't lift himself…

DEEMA: Wait… at least until I get back okay?

ZAINNAB: (*Struggling and breathless*.) You take the other side.

DEEMA: Umee, wait…

ZAINAB pushes DEEMA away and stabs at the boxes with the knife she is carrying. She throws it down and DEEMA picks it up.

ZAINAB: They are in my way. Boxes and books and papers and bags all over. My garden is not a dump. This house is not a dump. I want all out of here… you understand? Out, out!

ZAINAB kicks the box and then hits herself on the head. DEEMA tries to grab her. She pulls at her hair dupatta and continues to slap herself and pull at her hair.

Get them out of here, please Deema please… all away from here. I want them gone. They're useless… useless! (40)

The play's most significant moment for me is a conversation between Deema and her mother where the mother, as frustrated and oppressed as she is in her life, tries to convince her daughter not to pursue her career dreams and wait for a husband at her family home. Instead of being happy that her daughter will not have the same destiny that she had because she can achieve independence through her career, Zainab is worried what the community will say about her for letting her daughter leave home before she finds her a husband. Deema does not understand her mother's logic and her desire for her own daughter to have similar life:

DEEMA: I used to watch dad when he came in after a day out cruising the Peak District or touring with friends. Soon as he was through the door, you'd be there with tea, roti. I'd watch him lie down on the sofa, put his legs up into your lap and you would press them for hours.

ZAINAB: You do not know.

DEEMA: Get the bowl, heat the water, put the salt, carry it in, wash his feet. I'd watch his face and all I saw was nothing. It was like he didn't see you. Like he didn't see any of us, like he'd do anything to swap places with the man at the Peak District. It was like he was saying, 'Look what you've done to me,' and you were silent. He was silent. It was all nothing.

ZAINAB: He had dreams to make more.

DEEMA: And I used to think, what sort of man would cause so much misery to a woman like you.

ZAINAB: He had many grand schemes.
[…]
ZAINAB: Your father has been a friend to many… A wife has to look after her partner.

DEEMA: Partner? He's never even poured you a glass of water from the kitchen tap.

ZAINAB: From child to old man, so many dreams for us all… dreams that even Ottomans in a thousand lifetimes could not fulfil. In thirty years he never touched me. He always tried to make a better life. Some people's souls are too soft Deema. They are not tough enough for this world.

DEEMA: While he was dreaming, you worked, don't you understand that? You could have done…

ZAINAB: And if we do as they do where are we all? (78)

It is as if Zainab believes that this life of servitude is a woman's destiny, and instead of pushing her daughter in the opposite direction she tries to convince her that this is an inescapable destiny that she must accept. Deema has watches and observes her parents all her life and she could see the great distortion and injustice in the relationship. She sees her father as a person who exploits and disrespects his wife, and she refuses to accept any of the justifications that her mother gives to her husband. This is why she is not sad like her mother but angry, and not frustrated with Rafique's attitude towards the family's problems but sceptical and anticipates only the worst from him.

Deema decides to take the job and leave, and what she leaves behind is a life without any hope for her, as symbolized in the last scene of the play in which Tariq digs out a bag of drugs from his mother's dying plant, the minute after he promises his sister he will change his ways and take control of his life.

Deadeye is a play that offers the protagonist two doors that lead to two different pathways, and Amber Lone offers the two options to the audience/readers and invites them to think about the options as well. The build up to the moment of choice, the increasingly difficult situation of the family where Deema's help is desperately needed, the glimpse of hope that appears after the climax when the family are sitting together harmoniously, and the fact that it is the mother rather than the father or brother who tries to convince Deema to stay and find a husband, all these factors together make the choice much more complicated and difficult than one would expect. Amber Lone is making a comment on how multi-layered and sensitive the factors that affect a Muslim woman's decisions about work, money, and general independence are. Years ago when I started this PhD I used to have the naïve scepticism when I think about Muslim women's problems in the UK. I used to question why many Muslim women would still make decisions against their own interest when they live in a country that has many laws that support their independence. The research I have done for this chapter, and the conditions and choices that this play presents for me as a reader answered my questions and enabled me to understand the intricacy of how patriarchy and ideology work in different circumstances.

Sweet Cider

Sweet Cider is a Tamasha production written by Emteaz Hussain and first produced in 2008 at The Arcola theatre in London. The play is set in a park that is frequented by a group of six young boys and girls, four of them are Muslim and probably Pakistanis because of the occasional use of Urdu words, one is a Sikh girl and one a White English boy. The three girls all live in a refuge for girls escaping from their families. We do not know why exactly Tazeem is in the refuge, but we know that her family have paid a bounty hunter to find her and bring her back home. Nosheen says that she escaped because her uncle tried to molest her, and when she confronted him and told her family they told her to keep quiet; her family are not looking for her. Jasvinder escaped because she is Sikh and she is in love with a Muslim boy, Aki. Aki is trying to live up to the expectations of his family to be a man and take care of himself, so he sells random stuff to people in the park; he leads Jasvinder astray and then leaves her, so she packs her bag and leaves the refuge, probably back to her family. All three boys take drugs in the park, and we discover that Amir and Steve are in love, although Steve also sleeps with Tazeem and gets her pregnant, thus complicating her crisis further.

A key character in this play is Rabia, who is an old woman who spends most of her time at the park either watching TV or sweeping the ground and collecting random litter in her trolley. The Rabia character is the equivalent of the wise fool in Shakespearean and Greek dramas; she watches people who go to the park, listens to them and sometimes interacts with them, either providing advice or passing judgement on what they are doing. Most characters disregard Rabia and her words, treating her like a crazy tramp, except for Nosheen who recognizes Rabia's wisdom and connects with her; eventually Rabia saves Nosheen's life when she stops her from burning herself in the park in the final scene. Rabia is the one who starts the play with a monologue, and she also ends almost every scene of the play, as if to function as the character that reflects on the events of the scene through her conversations with other characters, non-verbal interaction with elements on the stage, or with her soliloquies when she addresses the audience directly. Rabia is the first name of the most famous female Muslim Sufis, Rabi'a Al-Adawiya. In the traditional account, Al-Adawiya used to be a prostitute, and one day people came to stone her for adultery but stones would not hit her, and she took that incident as a sign from god. She became a pious woman and eventually a

famous Sufi who was followed by people for her wisdom. The play's Rabia mentions the historic Rabia and repeats a famous quotation by her a number of time in the play: 'I want to extinguish the fires of hell, and burn down the gardens of paradise. They block the way to God. I do not want to worship for fear of punishment or the promise of reward, but simply for the love of God.' (Hussain 2008: 20)[35]

The main theme of this play is the phenomenon of these girls escaping their families and living in refuges. With the two lead characters, Nosheen and Tazeem, we feel a sense of inescapable destiny and an inevitable gloomy end coming their way. A number of elements create this sense, starting with the conversation between Tazeem's father, Fiaz, and the bounty hunter, Mahood:

> **Mahmood** You got a picture
>
> *Fiaz gives Mahmood a picture. Mahmood looks at the picture. He then takes out 30-40 more copies from his pocket*
>
> **Fiaz** Here
>
> **Mahmood** good. I'll take these to the takeaways, and the taxi biradri.[36] My business taxi business, they are watching the refuge, so I'll let you know if we see her.
>
> **Fiaz** do whatever you can to get her home
>
> **Mahmood** most of the time I don't need to use my stick, y'now my danda, once they're in my car, they're alright. They usually come home.
>
> *Mahmood starts to leave.*
>
> **Fiaz** Hey, they call you the bounty hunter ey na?
>
> **Mahmood** no, no, no, not the bounty hunter, not me. Me, me, I'm a community mediator, I keep families together. (15)

Mahmood words, his body language and the tone of his voice give an unmistakable sense that he is going to succeed in his job, and it is only a matter of how and when. Another indication that Tazeem is not going to make it on her own and achieve her dreams is in scene thirteen on the day of her X Factor auditions. Tazeem is throughout the first twelve scenes of the play excited, optimistic and bubbly. In fact, she seems to be the only one thriving among the girls

[35] This play is not published, but I have a copy of the transcript, courtesy of Sudha Bhuchar the artistic director of Tamasha, who gave it to me on the condition that it is only used for the purpose of this PhD thesis.
[36] Community or brotherhood.

in the refuge; she finds a job, moves to her own flat, and applies to audition in the X Factor. The day of the audition though, she has a sudden change of heart, and she tells Steve about it when he sees her sitting alone in the park:

> **Tazeem** I didn't even go for it, I waited in the queue for 6 hours. Everyone looked great, all dressed up, like they had money and could get the best stuff. Kate Moss at Top Shop, skinny rock chicks and all that, I just felt ugly. (*pause*) It didn't feel like I was there, do you know what I'm saying, it was like I was somewhere else looking down on myself… I thought of my mum, you know watching. It was crazy, really crazy atmosphere. I said to Ella, I can't do it, I'm going, she wanted to stay, she'd met people she knew. I didn't know anybody, I just left her in the queue. I just left. (28)

Class and community, and also fear of the unknown and the scary prospects of independence for a teenage girl without her family, all come together to create Tazeem's sense of estrangement and not belonging. The next time we see Tazeem after this scene she is angry and fighting with her best friend Nosheen for no apparent reason. Tazeem then breaks down and tells Nosheen she is pregnant, and that the father of the baby was Steve whom she had sex with after he comforted her on her X Factor day. Surely enough, the following scene Mahmood, and with him Tazeem's inevitable destiny find her:

> Tazeem is left in the park on her own. Enter Mahmood, he's holding a stick. Tazeem looks behind her, there is another (white) male at the other end of the park blocking her way. Mahmood signals for her to come to him. Tazeem has no choice but to follow. Fade out. (35)

Emteaz Hussain herself escaped to a refuge when she was sixteen years old, and her own story, together with the many stories she must have heard and seen during her time in the refuge have inspired this play. The cause of Muslim young girls who escape violence and imprisonment by their families inspired her most recent play, *Blood*, in 2015 as well. *Sweet Cider* is one of the darkest plays I have watched or read. There is no sense or hope of a positive ending throughout the play. *Blood* is another play by Hussain which is also about a Muslim girl who escapes home, and Hussain makes her female protagonist face the problems of both Tazeem and Nosheen: her family uses criminals to hunt her down, just like Tazeem, and her mother ignores her when she tells her that her brother's friend, whom they want her to marry, raped her, just like Nosheen's family refuse to listen to her when she tells them her uncle raped her. The main difference between the two plays is that *Blood* ends with some hope. There is a knock on the door where the lovers are hiding, they are nervous, the young

man goes out to see who is knocking, and when he comes back he jokingly leads his girlfriend to believe he was hurt and then laughs, indicating that nothing really happened to him. The play ends with laughter and a kiss, but also a clear sense of fear and tension, as if the laughter and the kiss are despite, and in retaliation to the danger with which the lovers live. In other words, Hussain's two depictions of the issue are dark and gloomy, albeit there is a sense of resistance and a glimmer of hope in the 2015 play. Hussain's dark motif in the two plays reflects the seriousness of the issue being represented. Going back to the sections at the beginning of this chapter, the issue with more potential for physical violence and even murder is the issue of sexuality and ownership of the woman's body, hence, probably, the unavoidable tone of Hussain's plays about the issue.

As Hussain herself says in her note on the play in Tamasha's website:

> 'The majority of girls who do run, thankfully, do not end up as honour killings. But what can happen involves a complex mix of loosened family connections and cultural alienation. This can sometimes leave the girls feeling they have little option but to return to what they know best: the oppressive environment from which they had originally fled.' [37]

[37] http://kristinelandonsmith.com/sweet-cider/

Chapter Three

Integration/Non-Integration of Muslim Women in the British Society

Introduction

When studying British Muslim women's integration in British society, one needs to consider many levels of the issue: national, religious, generational, and gender levels, and the first step should be to look at the integration of Muslims in the UK in general. The majority of Muslims in the UK are first, second, and third generation immigrants. The immigration of Muslims to the UK on a large scale started in the 1960s with a wave of South-Asian immigration to the UK. Although five or six decades might sound like a long time, yet it is a very short period of time for identities to drastically alter, or for either hegemony or complete inclusion of ethnic minorities to happen, and that is why the debate about minorities in the UK is different to that in the USA, for example. Other than the fact that the large scale immigration phenomenon is relatively recent in the history of UK and Western Europe- especially large scale Muslim immigration- whereas mass immigration is a key element in the foundation of the USA. Sandra Ponzanesi explains that Europe consists of 'nation-states that from an ethnic and cultural point of view are much more homogenous than the United States' (Ponzanesi 2002: 212) Ponzanesi also points out how the colonial past of Europe and its relationship with former colonies contribute to the fact that the North American 'melting pot credo' is not applicable for Europe and its immigrant minorities. Instead of assimilation, the concepts of integration and multiculturalism are mostly used in the UK in particular in discussions about the immigrant minorities in this country, whether we are talking about first, second or third wave immigrants.

Multiculturalism then - which is the belief that different ethnic components of society can coexist, that their cultural specificities should be celebrated, and that the culture of the

majority should not necessarily dominate the public sphere and be adopted by the minorities - is the more prevalent theory in the UK. The calls for minorities to assimilate and melt in the pot of Britishness are not rare or weak though, and right wing voices have always expressed fears about political shifts towards multiculturalism. The British population have been inundated by tabloid and newspaper headlines warning from the dangers of Multiculturalism and the disappearance of Britishness and Christianity for decades:

Goodbye Christianity, Hello Multicultural Wasteland.[38]

When Did We Stop Caring About Our National Culture?[39]

St. George's Day Festivities Snubbed by Council As City Too Multicultural[40]

Terrence Stamp's Explosive Outburst on Britain's Multiculturalism: 'No one speaks English'[41]

Multiculturalism has let terror flourish in Britain[42]

In fact, promises to protect the 'British way of life' and 'British values' have been consistent and worked like a motif throughout David Cameron's premiership between 2010-2016. In 2014, Cameron published an article in the Mail on Sunday outlining his understanding of what British values are and what plans he had to protect them. For him, British values are: 'a belief in freedom, tolerance of others, accepting personal and social responsibility, respecting and upholding the rule of law' (Cameron, 2014) He goes on to say that for him these values are 'as British as the Union flag, as football, and as fish and chips.' The choice of the Mail on Sunday could not be more significant as it is one of the most ultra-nationalist and ardent anti-immigration tabloids in the UK. As if this message was not clear enough, the Government's official website published this article with an extra feature that does not appear in its other pages and articles, which is a tab to translate the article to Arabic and Urdo.[43] This is one

[38] http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-3357881/PETER-HITCHENS-Goodbye-Christianity-hello-multicultural-wasteland.html
[39] http://blogs.spectator.co.uk/2013/07/how-have-we-become-so-diffident-about-our-national-culture/
[40] https://www.thesun.co.uk/archives/news/1142419/st-georges-day-festivities-snubbed-by-council-as-city-too-multicultural/
[41] http://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/592357/Actor-Terrence-Stamp-Britain-multiculturalism-cost-country-culture-speak-English
[42] http://www.express.co.uk/comment/expresscomment/12653/Multiculturalism-has-let-terror-flourish-in-Britain
[43] https://www.gov.uk/government/news/british-values-article-by-david-cameron

example of how the British government and media have consistently used the vague concept of British values to appease right-wing voters and at the same time single out and alienate British Muslims.

Kwame Appiah, one of the leading scholarly writers on cosmopolitanism, responds to calls for maintaining 'national identity' in the face of multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism by questioning the very concept of national identity or national culture. According to Appiah, there are many factors that make up different identities, like professional occupations, religion, local traditions, and activities that people partake in. None of these identities are specific to the citizens of a certain country, and also none of them is inevitably fixed and cannot change, therefore, national culture is fluid and changeable concept. (Appiah 1997) The changeable nature of what is considered to be 'a national value' is what explains, as an example, the drastic change in political and cultural attitudes towards same sex relationships in the UK. It moved from being a negative social stigma and a crime punishable by law to becoming widely accepted, protected by law against discrimination, and a legal form of marriage in a matter of less than half a century. When David Cameron includes 'tolerance towards others' as one of the essential British values, this means, among the things it means, tolerance towards the LGBT community, as discrimination based on sexual orientation is punishable by law in the UK now. Only few decades ago this 'British value', which is 'as British as the Union flag' did not exist as homosexuality was a crime.

Mullticulturalism, Liberalism, Feminism, and Racism

Not all criticism to multiculturalism comes from the right wing and the ultra-nationalists; some feminists have reservations about certain aspects of multiculturalism. Susan Muller-Okin expresses concern that giving special rights and special treatments to certain minority groups of people could sometimes lead to patriarchal and misogynistic practices being encouraged and tolerated. Okin claims that 'Some proponents of group rights argue that even cultures that "flout the rights of [their individual members] in a liberal society" should be accorded group rights or privileges if their minority status endangers the culture's continued existence.' (Okin 1999: 11) She uses two major examples on how this tolerance of injustice towards women and children happed in the liberal West: first, the case of France allowing

immigrants to bring in multiple wives to France in the 1980s. According to Okin, reporters discovered that 'that the women affected by polygamy regarded it as an inescapable and barely tolerable institution in their African countries of origin, and an unbearable imposition in the French context.' (10) The fact that this practice, which clearly affected women negatively took place in the name of respecting cultural sensitivities for immigrants, yet at the same time the calls for banning Muslim girls from wearing headscarves in schools in the name of secularism were loud and popular. There are clear inconsistencies in the two cases: in one case an alleged cultural practice is upheld against the laws of the country in the name of respect for cultural differences despite the fact that it is easy to argue that it is an anti-woman practice, yet in the second case the cultural and religious practice is ignored in the name of secularism and liberalism although many of the females involved with the issue claim that the practice of wearing hijab is their free choice and a source of empowerment for them.

Okin's second, and most significant example of how special rights for minorities could sometime be dangerous for women is when lawyers in the USA use what is known as 'cultural defences' to drop or reduce charges against criminals who commit crimes in the name of culture or religion. In most of the cases the offender is a male and the victim is a female, and Okin argues that the liberal society and the liberal system fail the female and the vulnerable of minority groups when they accept that alleged cultural and religious motives behind crimes entitle the criminal to reduced or dropped charges.

Martha Nussbaum is one the of the editors of the book entitled after Okin's article, *Is Multiculturalism Bad For Women?* in which she, and many other authors, respond to Okin's article. In Nussbaum's response entitled *A Plea For Difficulty* she rightly points out how Okin's tone is, in parts of the article, polemic against religion, and how sometimes she provides generalist characterizations of religion and dismisses it as mere mythical stories. However, most of Nussbaum's response is a defence of religion and a general praise of multiculturalism as a concept, yet she provides no answers to any of the questions and concerns that Okin voices. In doing so, Nussbaum probably confirms Okin's fears that because of the sensitivity of the issue of minority groups' rights, and because of genuine liberal concern for minorities' rights, there is a real possibility that individual rights- especially those of women and children- may come after what groups claim to be their collective rights, and this could potentially facilitate patriarchal practices indirectly. It is, however, very important to discuss legitimate

liberal reservations about certain practices among minorities with subtlety, specificity, and nuance to avoid on one hand neglecting patriarchal and misogynistic practices that might occur within elements of some minority groups.

The second difficulty that liberalism has is that it allows fascists and racists to use the discussion for their own agendas. These reservations can and have been used as a cover for attacks on minorities and on multiculturalism as an idea by far right groups and racists. Probably the most worrying example of using liberalism as a cover for racism and bigotry is when fascist groups like the English Defence League put 'the denigration and oppression of women' in Islam on the top of their alleged reasons for fighting Islam, when this group in particular is notorious for abusing Muslim women on countless occasions.[44] I only use EDL as an example here, but studies and surveys in the UK reveal that there is a pattern of attacking Muslim women in hate crimes across the country. The 2015 report from Tell MAMA (Measuring Anti Muslim Attacks) reveals that 'Muslim women are more likely to be attacked than men in most settings. The largest proportion of perpetrators are white males. This means that the largest proportion of incidents involves Muslim women, usually wearing Islamic clothing – be it the hijab, abaya or niqab. Verbal abuse from men often carries misogynistic, racist and Islamophobic overtones.'[45] Another report by Tell MAMA quoted in The Guardian reveals that in the first year of establishing the Tell MAMA helpline, more than 630 Anti-Muslim incidents have been reported, mostly against women.[46]

Women are seen as the easier target- and the most visible due to the dress code of many Muslim women- for those who commit hate crimes.[47] Avtar Brah argues that racism and sexism are similar in that 'Both sets of significations figure the body as a bearer of immutable difference whether or not this putative difference is represented as biological or cultural.' (Brah 1993: 13) This similarity could be another reason why hate crimes happen to women

[44] http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/fiyaz-mughal/depressing-picture-emergerges-of-muslim-women_b_1658563.html
http://edlreview.blogspot.co.uk/2012/07/edl-supporters-harass-women.html
[45] http://tellmamauk.org/geography-anti-muslim-hatred-2015-tell-mama-annual-report/
[46] http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2013/mar/09/muslim-helpline-faith-attacks-women
[47] http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-politics/10804880/Islamophobia-People-grab-our-veils-call-us-terrorists-and-want-us-dead-What-its-really-like-to-be-a-Muslim-woman-in-Britain.html

more than men since the victim in this case is 'the other' in two different ways – female and Islamic.

One of the most important ways in which sexism and racism are related is what Brah calls the 'racial contamination' factor, which means that men in patriarchal societies where ultra-nationalism and racism are strong consider women to be 'embodiments of male honour, and as such become a site of contestation for this honour. Hence, the defence of women and children becomes a rallying slogan of men going to war, as women from opposing factions fall victim to rape and other sexual atrocities.' (16) Frequently in war contexts, the need to 'protect' women becomes symbolic of the protection of one side's own country, religion or race, while such abuse is exactly what they inflict on women from the opposite side of the conflict.

In communities of ultra-nationalist, religious extremist, or race supremacist tendencies, there is usually negative reception and lack of acceptance of women who marry from different nationality, religion, or race, and this attitude is directed more at women who marry from outside the community than men. One example on this is that there are so many countries where the children of a mother who marries someone from a different nationality are denied the nationality and citizenship of their mother's country, sometimes indefinitely and sometimes until they are 16 or 18. The children of a father who is married to a foreigner, however, automatically get the citizenship regardless of their mother's foreign status[48]. In Syria, for example, campaigners tried to get the parliament to allow children of a Syrian mother and a non-Syrian father to become Syrian citizens in 2008 and in 2009, but in both instances the case was not even discussed in the parliament. In 2011 the draft for this law was finally presented to parliament, but after four years it is still under study with very little hope of it becoming a law soon. This is one example of the idea I discussed earlier of linking communal honour with the women, and it is also an example that shows the tendency in patriarchal, ultra-nationalist societies to claim authority over women as much as possible. I will discuss later in this chapter when I study *My name Is…* the Islamic belief that Muslim men are allowed to marry non-Muslim women, but Muslim women are not allowed to marry non-Muslim men. The excuse for the double standard is that women follow their men, and so do

[48] Some of the countries that practice this type of discrimination are Syria, Lebanon, Jordan Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Qatar, and Kuwait.

their kids, so if a Muslim woman marries a non-Muslim then she and her children could become non-Muslims. The same logic seems to be behind the laws that discriminate against a mother who marries a foreigner; that this woman and her children belong to the father and therefore the value and integrity of their belonging to the country of the mother is questionable.

Acculturation

Simplification and generalisation are two key mistakes that we can make when it comes to studying the situation of immigrant communities and minorities in the larger society. The mere word 'integration' could be problematic because it could subconsciously lead us towards anticipating that the individuals who belong to the minority in question belong to one of two clear cut categories - integrated, or ghettoized - when actually there are many levels and shapes for the interaction between minority and majority, or immigrant and indigenous communities. Acculturation studies offer a potentially more nuanced and detailed alternative to the simplistic narratives about immigrant communities and their position in host societies. Instead of focusing only on the immigrants and how they respond to the challenges of living in a society with a different culture, acculturation studies how both the immigrant communities and the indigenous population both influence each other, and how, individually and collectively, the reaction to these influences differ according to a myriad of factors.

According to John W. Berry, there are four general acculturation strategies followed by what he calls the non-dominant groups of society, that is immigrant groups:

1. Assimilation: 'individuals prefer to shed their heritage culture, and become absorbed into the dominant society' (Berry 2005: 705)
2. Separation: 'when individuals place a value on holding on to their original culture, and at the same time wish to avoid interaction with others' (705)
3. Integration: 'there is some degree of cultural integrity maintained, and at the same time seeking, as a member of an ethnocultural group, to participate as an integral part of the larger social network.' (705)

4. Marginalization: ‘when there is little possibility or interest in heritage cultural maintenance (often for reasons of enforced cultural loss), and little interest in having relations with others (often for reasons of exclusion or discrimination). (705)

Berry explains the four strategies of acculturation used by what he calls the dominant groups of society (the indigenous majority) with direct relation to the non-dominant groups’ four strategies: ‘Assimilation, when sought by the dominant acculturating group, is termed the ‘‘melting pot’’. When separation is forced by the dominant group it is called ‘‘segregation’’. Marginalization, when imposed by the dominant group, is called ‘‘exclusion’’. Finally, integration, when diversity is an accepted feature of the society as a whole, including all the various ethnocultural groups, is called ‘‘multiculturalism’’. (706)

The Muslim Communities in the UK

With the strategies of acculturation in mind, and with different Western liberal and feminist thoughts on multiculturalism in mind, I will look at different examples of how the British Muslim community position themselves in the British society, and how this affects Muslim women in particular. I have already referred to organised racism and bigotry in this country in the example of EDL, and mentioned how the EDL is just one in a long series of racist, xenophobic and Islamophobic organisations in the UK (National Front, British National Party, Britain First, Liberty GB, and others). These parties and groups, together with constant negative media representation of Muslims on a daily basis have for decades poisoned the British Muslims’ relation with their society and made them feel estranged. On an official level, the current conservative government has come up with its Counter-Terrorism and Security Act in 2015, with a great focus on children at school. On paper, the act is supposed to spot the danger of radicalising schoolchildren before it is too late, but The Muslim Council of Britain’s report on the policy warned that the report clearly singles out Muslim communities and ignores right-wing terrorism, that it makes Muslims feel like ‘a suspect community’ and ‘the statutory duty on public authorities, including nurseries, schools, optometrists, GPs, hospitals and universities, to implement the “Prevent” agenda’ (Versi, 2015) Moreover, the government’s overview of the policy cites the conservative Baroness Warsi’s criticism of the policy: ‘We’re told that our protection and our freedoms can only be secured by the

curtailment of freedoms. And the battle of ideas is not fought and won by bigger and better ideas but by banning, silencing through legislation and securitising communities.' (Warsi in: Dawson 2016)This sentiment was clear among a group of students in an Islamic secondary school in London who featured in a recent BBC2 documentary, *Welcome to the Mosque*. The students said they were asked if the 'believe or support the ideology of ISIS', and one of the students interviewed said 'we don't see other schools being asked that sort of questions, so it's like questioning our identity.'[49]

These social, political, media and governmental levels of discrimination against British Muslims are good examples on how the dominant elements of the British society use the melting pot, segregation, and exclusion strategies that John Berry talked about. Many British Muslims, on the other hand, choose to follow the strategy of separation. The stereotypes about Muslims in the UK are widely known: they oppress their women, they are extremists, they sympathise with terrorists, etc. But some Muslims have their own stereotypes about the White British, including: they are promiscuous, they are unhygienic, they have no moral values, etc. Just as those who believe the stereotypes about Muslims feel they have civil superiority over Muslims, Muslims who believe stereotypes about White Britains believe they have a moral superiority over them. There are so many factors that contribute to the production of the sense of otherness and moral superiority among some Muslims, but I will only focus on two factors that are related, in my view, and also have direct influence on British Muslim women. These two factors are the madrassas, and the Islamic book Bahishti Zewar, with what it represents.

Madrassas are Islamic schools for children to learn Islamic teachings, and the word 'madrassa' itself means school in Arabic, but it is used outside the Arabic-Speaking countries to refer to Islamic schools. Historically, madrassas would operate inside mosques before or after prayers, and according to the Institute for Public Policy Research, the majority of them still do.[50] The report shows a positive aspect of madrassas as expressed by current and former madrassa students and that is they boost their confidence when they find themselves not a minority like they are in mainstream schools, and this helps them find their feet in the bigger society

[49] http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/b06fpxcv/welcome-to-the-mosque
[50] According to IPPR report on madrassas in 2011, 53% of madrassas operate from mosques: http://www.thecordobafoundation.com/attach/inside-madrassas_Nov2011_8301.pdf

they belong to. However, the report also shows that not a small minority of madrassas do not require their staff to have a minimum degree or qualification as teachers, and also a significant minority do not carry out the Criminal Record Bureau checks on their staff, which is what OFSTED requires anyone who works in the field of children's education to have in this country. Finally, I want to point out another finding in the report which is that corporal punishment is used in some madrassas. In fact, the report refers to a 'BBC Radio 4 investigation where 191 responding local authorities in England, Scotland and Wales confirmed allegations of physical and sexual abuse in the past three years, making a total of 421 cases of physical abuse in madrassas. Even more concerning was the fact that only 10 of those cases went to court, and only two led to convictions.' (Bradley and Cherti 2011: 61)

The point to be made here is that there are a number of standards on which parents would not usually compromise when it comes to the education and treatment of their children in mainstream schools, but they seem to make an exception for Islamic schools. One possible reason behind this is a famous hadith that tells parents to teach their kids to pray when they are seven years old, and beat them if they do not do it when they are ten (Khan 2009, 94). There are so many hadiths that encourage learning to the extent of encouraging Muslims to travel as far as China (at the time of Mohammad in the 7th century) in pursuit of knowledge, but this is the only hadith that gives parents the right to beat their kids for the sake of learning, and a common interpretation of it is that this license for corporal punishment given by Mohammad only in this case is because it is not any knowledge, it is teaching religion and prayer.

This, I argue, could contribute to the sense of division between Islamic and British 'principles' in the mind of a Muslim child who goes to a madrassa and a mainstream school, and the sense of belonging to two worlds where something is unacceptable in one world yet tolerated in the other. The other and more influential feature of some madrassas is teaching the Qur'an in Arabic to children who do not speak Arabic. There is a highly problematic and controversial assumption among some Muslims that because Arabic was revealed to Mohammad in Arabic then it should be recited and learned in Arabic. In this way, neither the main language for these children (English), not their ancestral mother language (whether that is Urdu, Punjabi, Bengali, etc.) could help them understand and appreciate the main source of their religion. As a native speaker of Arabic myself, I have seen how in many cases the imams and Islamic

teachers break down words in the Qur'an to create sound that are easier to learn and repeat for their students without giving them any chance of understanding what they are reciting since the words themselves are changed. The danger of this kind of teaching is that it makes the Qur'an alien and unreachable for Muslim children, and thus they are fully dependent on their imams as their source of religious teaching:

> despite the fact that many British young Muslims speak and think in English, there is not a well-worked-out Qur'anic pedagogy in English. Thus, many of these young people are left either ignorant of this fundamental source of Islam or at the mercy of radical transnational Islamic groups, which try to introduce them into a rigid ahistorical understanding of Islam. (Sahin in Lewis 2007: 45)

Although there is no prohibition or enforced control over learning the Qur'an in any language, and translated copies in all languages are available, yet it is easy- especially for children who are attending madrassas in addition to their main school- to accept whatever the imam tells them instead seeking the translated copy that they could understand. Encouraging Muslim children to study how their imams interpret the Qur'an instead of studying it themselves makes them grow up accepting concepts and beliefs that are not necessarily Islamic, but cultural and traditional, assuming that they are key elements of their religion. This dangerous practice of alienating the youth from their religious texts by teaching it as some sort of sacred archaic text that needs to be revered but not studied means that religious scholars go unchallenged when they issue one fatwa after another branding certain practices un-Islamic and others as core Islamic values. This is particularly dangerous for female Muslims more than anyone else. I have discussed throughout the previous chapters how the mainstream Islamic establishments have consistently misinterpreted the Qur'an and the Hadith and misinformed Muslims about certain family laws and practices related to the sexuality of the female in order to control the female by linking traditional practices falsely to Islam. The gap and the distance that teaching the Qur'an in Arabic to non-Arabic speaking children creates between the youth and their holy book consolidates the belief that many un-Islamic misogynistic social practices are Islamic. The result of this is that many Muslim youth grow up accepting this dangerous misinformation and internalizing it as an integral part of their Islamic identity that they have to uphold.

The unchallenged authority of religious sheikhs[51] is even stronger when the sheikh is a revered figure from the country of origin of a specific British Muslim community who issued his fatwas and died decades or even centuries ago. This is the case of *Bahishti Zewar* (Heavenly Ornaments), which is a manual book that instructs women on how to be a good Muslim. It is written about a hundred years ago by a famous Indian religious scholar, and it is believed to be a very common pre-marriage gift for brides-to-be among South-Asian Muslims. In fact the introduction of the online English version of the book does say 'it is a popular practice to present this volume to a new bride. The motivation behind this gesture is that the young woman is taking up a new identity and new life as a wife and mother-to-be. She should be well versed in the rites, rituals and tradition of Islam.' (Thanwi, 1)[52] There is no mention for the need to educate husbands with this book, either because the main purpose is to control the wife and not the husband, by 393 pages of extremely strict behavioural rules that ban her from a myriad of things including 'singing while bringing water from the river', or it might be due to the fact that in a traditional patriarchal family the mother is tasked with disciplining the children more than the father since she stays at home with them all day, while the father is out working. I tend to believe that the main reason why there is a focus on the woman and not the man is the belief that the honour and reputation of the Muslim family lies with the female members and not the male ones, and so the danger and outcome of a wife's mistake or transgression are much more serious and much more scrutinised than those of a husband. Part four of the book is on marriage, divorce and family life. It has a section for 'the rights of the husband' and a section for 'the method of living with one's husband', and there are also small sections for the rights of the parents, step-mother, elder brother, in-laws, relatives, and even the rights of the wet-nurse, but there is no section for the rights of the wife or on the method of living with one's wife; there is however a section on 'feeding and clothing the wife'. This part of the book include all sorts of patriarchal and misogynistic teachings, from encouraging the wife never to argue with the husband or be stubborn and insist on what she wants, to telling her that serving the in-laws as long as they are alive should be considered an honour, all the way to threatening her of angels cursing her all night long if she ever denies her husband sexual intercourse because she does not want to do it. (206-207)

[51] It is worth mentioning that the word 'sheikh' means a religious scholar, and the word 'imam' means a sheikh who leads prayers.

[52] http://www.islamicbulletin.org/free_downloads/women/bahishti_1_2_3.pdf

Moreover, Thanwi asserts the superiority of Muslims over non-Muslims and the superiority of Muslims from certain ethnicities and casts over other Muslims in different parts of his book. The significance of claims like these from Thanwi and countless other Islamic scholars, past and contemporary, is that they have paved the way to a sense of moral superiority among British Muslims towards other Muslims from different backgrounds but more commonly towards non-Muslim in Britain. I have referred earlier to stereotypes among some Muslims about the cleanliness and morality of the White British.

The issues of integration, assimilation, separation and multiculturalism for Muslim women in the UK have inspired a number of British playwrights to depict them on the stage. Three plays in particular stand out for me and I am going to look at them in this chapter: *Sisters* by Stephanie Street in 2010, *My Name Is*… by Sudha Bhuchar in 2014, and *Burq Off!* By Nadia Manzoor also in 2014. *Sisters* and *My Name Is*... are both verbatim plays, and *Burq Off!* is autobiographical. The fact that all three plays are based on true stories- as narrated by the interviewees in the first two plays and the writer about her own life in the third one- and the fact that all three writers have expressed their intentions to contribute to the discussion and the debate about the social issues they highlight in their plays, made me want to study these particular three plays in this chapter. Moreover, I find a crucial value and function to the dramatic structure of these three plays and in certain writing and staging decisions in them, and I will try to analyse these dramaturgical moments.

Sisters

Sisters was written by actress and playwright Stephanie Street who told me in an interview with her that the idea to write a verbatim play, and to write about Muslim women in particular first came to her while she was acting in another verbatim play called *The Laramie Project*. *The Laramie Project* was written by a theatre company in New York based on interviews they did with people from a town called Laramie in USA where a gay man was killed, and while that play was showing in the West End in London, the 7/7 bombing happened and interrupted the play, and everything else in London, for a couple of days. From that point onwards, Street became more and more interested in the public debate about Muslims in Britain, and in how stereotypical and limited these debates are, and how much this affects Muslim women in particular. Street then decided to start the process of interviewing Muslim women with a view to writing a verbatim play about their lives. The result was hundreds of hours of interviews with over forty Muslim women from a number of cities. Between *The Laramie Project* and *Sisters*, Stephanie Street also played two significant lead Muslim roles in two important plays: Nosheen in *Sweet Cider* by Emteaz Hussain in 2008, and Sabrina in *Shades* by Alia Bano in 2009. Street, then, had an important role in the making of the very first few plays that had British Muslim female characters as the lead characters, while her very first play as a writer, *Sisters,* was brewing.

The 43 interviewees have become 17 characters in the play; for production practicality, only the most unique/controversial characters were chosen, and also, as Street mentions in the program of the play, the group of four students that we see in the play 'were actually a group of twelve girls who've been conflated down' (Street 2010: 6). The characters come from a variety of social, professional, political and ideological backgrounds including students (some with strict and some with liberal ideologies), traditional housewives with ten children, progressive independent business women, a Sufi who runs a women's organization, White English converts, the captain of the British Muslim women football team, and a lesbian social activist; all of them British, and all identify themselves as Muslim. Street also suggested in her interview with me that the choice of her play to be the first to be performed at the Studio Theatre in the Crucible after it reopened following a £15 million refurbishment project between 2007-2009 was 'a statement of intent' to engage with the community by Daniel

Evans who was the new artistic director of Sheffield Theatres at the time. The Crucible also arranged for Street to meet some unique individuals from the Muslim community as part of her project, including Maryam, the religious scholar who features in the play. Moreover, six post show events were organised during the run of the play with either the writer, director, or members of the cast. In all the six post show events there was one incident where a group of young Muslim women expressed their anger about the play and accused Street of blaspheming and making up the story of a lesbian Muslim activist because no one can be a practicing Muslim and homosexual at the same time. The play is an all-female cast of five actresses who each played three or four characters: Zahra Ahmadi, Denise Black, Lena Kaur, Nisha Nayar, and Stephanie Street, and also directed by a female, Ruth Carney, who was the director of *The Laramie Project* production that Street acted in it. Not only the cast was all female, but also one of the post show events, which was named 'Women Only Performance' in the play's program. The theatre invited women to bring their lunch with them, watch the play and then meet others and discuss the play after one morning showing. They also provided a free crèche to encourage more mothers to come. Such a post-show event shows that the theatre and the production team were trying to create a sense of closeness and intimacy in order to encourage an open discussion about the issues raised in the play, instead of having some women coming with a defensive attitude and anticipating to be offended as Muslim women, or on the other hand coming with a judgmental attitude and anticipating a play that will confirm their negative ideas about Muslim women.

The first group of women whose trust Street needed to win were her interviewees, so she promised to change their names and cities in the play, which probably helped them express their true feelings without worrying about sounding politically correct, or about the repercussions from their families and their communities.[53]

The theme of closeness and intimacy is also present during the play itself, and the audience are directly engaged repeatedly. The characters tell their stories directly to the audience, who are made to play the role of the interviewer, and when the action is taking place at the Khans there is a lot of interaction with some members of the audience, and sometimes with all of them. The play starts with a 'pre-show' in which Meena, the Khans' relative, followed by the

[53] Some of the women interviewed were featured in the play with their real names, like Maryam, the religious scholar.

Khans one-by-one greet the audience members to their home. They help the audience members find their seats and improvise small talk with them and offer them pakora and samosa, all halal or vegetarian. Just like the play starts with the Khans being good hosts to the audience, also before and after the interval we see examples of the Khans' hospitality and interaction with the audience:

> **Eileen** Samina, you can give some plates a wash. (*she starts clearing, passing Samina plates*) Meena, can you dish out the plate Auntie Hasina gave us... Stick 'em on there. (*To audience)* If you'll excuse me for a minute. (*Meena and Eileen exit*)
> **Salima** (*Coming back for plates*) D'you know, this is probably going to take us fifteen minutes to get the plates washed and the tarts laid out and everything...
> **Meena** If you want, you could grab a drink just out there as well.
> **Salima** Will you be ok? We'll be quick as we can...
> **Samina** 'Course they'll be ok- they're grown-ups, aren't they? We'll be done in fifteen... Ok, see you in a bit.
>
> *They both exit with dirty plates*. (51)

Right after the interval, we have Samina on the stage alone taking the opportunity that everyone else is in the kitchen to tell some stories that the family would not want to share, and then the rest of the Khans come in:

> *Shirin returns with a large plate of tart jams and some napkins. Eileen also returns*
> **Shirin** Oi! Salim's doing all the dishes and you're sat there gassing!
> **Samina** Sorry! I'll go help her.
>
> **Eileen** It's alright, she's almost done.
>
> **Shirin** (*passes jam tarts round the audience*) Here you are... No gelatine, all halal. (53)

In the very last scene of the play, Samina and Salima look at Shirin's daughter's wedding photos and show them to the audience, then Eileen invites the audience to come to Shirin's other daughter's wedding in one month as she hands someone in the audience a doggy bag suggesting it is time for them to leave and catch the train. Finally, the play ends with all of the Khans and their cousin Meena gathering around the sofa and looking at family photos together.

Street talks a lot in the play's program and in the interview she gave me, about the responsibility she feels as an actor and as a writer towards the subjects of her verbatim plays. The fact that the start and the end of the play, and the going into interval and the coming

back from it are marked by gestures of hospitality and generosity from the Khans and by them sharing happy private moments and family photos with the audience suggest that Street is trying to represent not just the stories that she heard, but also the spirit of people who told them.

As I mentioned earlier, each of the actresses plays more than one character. We should still be in the Khans' household when the characters are switched to someone else as if the other characters are the Khans' guests as well. Each character switch from a Khan woman to someone else is accompanied by a description on a big TV screen in the corner, and by the actors coming from within the audience. The actors are helped to do the change of state by Meena reading a quote from a pamphlet called 'Muslim Woman'. Other than helping the actors change the state, these quotes play a key role in the play as the stage direction explains: '*women who are not the family come forward with their stories about playing particular roles as British Muslim women. Over the change, Meena reads a quote from the pamphlet, espousing the stereotypical view of each of the roles as they come up. (each of these 'hinges' is verbatim found material)*' (27)

The first change of state in the play from welcoming audience in and offering them food to the actual action and plot of the play is almost started by the pamphlet itself:

> *There is a loud thud as a wodge of pamphlets hits the doormat. A subtle change in state focuses us in on the room*.
>
> **Meena** I'll get those...
>
> **Eileen** Oh, just bin it, whatever it is... The amount of rubbish that comes through. ...
> **Meena** I mean... (*Beat*) "Muslim Woman" (*skimming through the front page*) Oh, this is hilarious! There's even a website telling you how to... Why do people think...
> **Eileen** I don't know why you're bothering... I'll just stick the whole lot in the bin.
> **Meena** Yeah. (*Puts all but one in the bin. She continues to read the one she reads and parks herself on a sofa with the audience*)
>
> *Shirin re-enters and sits*
>
> **Salima** The waste of paper...
>
> [...]
> **Samina** You ok there, Meena?
>
> **Meena** (*Still reading*) Yeah, I'm fine, I'm educating miself. (26)

There is a clear sense of sarcasm about this kind of pamphlets among the Khans, and we get the sense that such literature is regarded as insignificant by them. Yet we discover through many of the stories that the Khan women tell about their lives show that they are subjected to extreme patriarchal practices that are not very different from the mentality shown in the quotes that Meena reads from the pamphlet.

The father interfered during his daughters' childhood to make sure he can isolate them from their surrounding as much as possible:

Shirin Father never allowed us to have English friends- we were at school, but we were never allowed to go to their houses.

Salima Kind of, at four o'clock after school, that was it; you were in, weren't you?

Shirin We never went out. I mean even if we played in the street in the front, y'know, our friends, if they were at the end of the road, "your dad!"- (*laughing*) we'd run in, because we weren't allowed out.

Samina Yeah, right from the end of the road they'd shout up the road and we'd scarper up the entry and pretend you'd been in!

Shirin He didn't like us mixing. He was very- he didn't want us picking bad habits/ up. (30-31)

This story gives the audience some insight into how strict the father is with his daughters from an early age. The daughters' small rebellion against their father as children- when they would play outside against his orders when he is not around- continues with Shirin and Samina when they grow up and decide to marry against their father's will. One of the quotes that Meena reads is: 'Fathers and mothers are responsible before Allah for the affairs of their daughters that have been entrusted to them; they should raise their daughters according to the Islamic manners.' (42) We learn in the play that some of the sons of the Khan family have girlfriends and that they drink alcohol, and that the elder son dies from excessive drinking. Yet the quote and the stories chosen by Street in the play focus on disciplining daughters in particular. In fact, the father shows a level of extremism beyond what is expressed in the quotation from the pamphlet when he disowns Shirin and Samina for years, not for having a boyfriend or marrying non-Muslims or non-Pakistanis, but for a marrying from a lower cast of Pakistani Muslims.

The Khan daughters also tell us about embarrassments they had to deal with as kids at school in order to satisfy their father's demands:

Shirin Because we'd been brought up not to use toilet paper- we wash. I even do it with my kids now… and mi dad would make us take an old lenor bottle with water in it to school and just leave it in the toilet. But for us, it had our names on it! D'you know what I mean? Everyone knew it was yours.

…

Samina … And I used to be horrified because the caretaker used to come and take it away and I'd be horrified and think "I'm gonna have to make up a story."

Eileen Taking plates and cutleries in because he wasn't sure about the cleanliness…

[…]

Shirin 'Cause we eat halal/meat

[…]

Eileen Then, when they showed him the dishwasher and the system- I think it was a three-rinse system- he was OK with that then. (22-23)

It is important for the father, as the example shows, to make it clear to his daughters that their traditional and religious practices have the absolute priority regardless of how uncomfortable and embarrassing they are for the daughters. Not only the domestic sphere of home and neighborhood are controlled, but also the participation in the public sphere of school is conditioned and subject to how satisfied the father is that his criteria for how his daughters will carry out every small and private detail of their lives. Interestingly though, and unlike the example of playing outside, the daughters do not say that they rebelled here and put the lenor bottles away and ate non-halal food when their father is not watching. This probably reflects a level of internalized ideas of what is right and wrong. Halal food and cleanliness are probably two elements of distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims that have become so intrinsic in the way these girls identify themselves and identify their difference from others that they cannot transgress against them even when their father is not watching.

The generational factor is very potent in *Sisters*; the difference in attitude between the younger characters and the others is very clear, especially in the attitude towards political issues. The youngest characters are the four students who are nineteen and twenty years old,

and three of them express a lot of anger about Britain, its foreign policies, its institutional discrimination against its Muslims, and about the society around them. They clearly see the world from a Muslim and non-Muslim perspective, so much so that when Amina talks about her jilbab,[54] she does not talk about religious reasons behind wearing it:

Amina Ok, I was a typical Asian girl, used to wear my *hij*, take off, on and off, kinda like that. And I had a few fights; I was a very bad girl. But then 7/7 happened and all that, some few stuff happened, 'cause then I's like, what's the difference between a non-Muslim and a Muslim, yeah? How can you differentiate between a Muslim and a non-Muslim?

Maysoon By your behavior?

Amina You can be sittin' with a peace-lovin' Christian and peace-lovin' Muslim and you can't tell the difference.

Maysoon Why is it so important to look different?

Amina 'Cause being different! C'mon, Mohammad says… Like you know, if some Muslim is passin' by, how you gonna say salaam to the sister if she's not wearing/ a hijab?

Maysoon But, wait… We've reduced Islam to just a headscarf, we've reduced Islam to just a piece of/ cloth.

[…]

Azr Like, um, a woman that's Muslim and she's wearing jeans, and basically trying to intermingle and be, like, someone that's Western- she'll never be Western cause she's Muslim, there's no point ignoring this… If you're wearing jeans and allowing other people to use you as an example. And then you haven't got, like, an against that. 'Cause like… it puts you down, it puts you down, it puts your religion down.' (25)

This conversation and others between these girls reflect a confusion that they have between what is religious and what is political. A little bit earlier before the conversation above they talk about hijab as sign of piety, yet when Maysoon- despite the fact that she herself wears hijab- challenges them when they say it is 'a covenant from God' and argues that it is not mentioned in the Qur'an as a must, they quickly move to talk about how objectifying it is to wear skimpy clothes, and then they move again to talk about hijab, jilbab, and niqab (and Azra is the only character in the play that wears a niqab) as identity markers before anything else,

[54] Jilbab is a long dress that women who wear hijab wear it over their normal clothes designed to hide any features of the body figure.

as we saw in the conversation above. For Aaishah, it is not just an identity crisis but a war of identities:

Aaishah We have this, you know, the relationship between people who are Muslim when you call each other, like, brother and sister... And when you see someone in the street you say *a'salaam wa'alauikum* to them... It's a unifying force and the West feels threatened by that... It's dangerous. When we're united it's dangerous. (Street 2010: 34)

Many of the characters in the play tell their own personal stories about racial and bigoted abuse they have been through, and Aaishah adds to that the sense of anger and injustice that she feels in empathy with fellow Muslims around the world because of the foreign policies of the British government. She even brings government discrimination against British Muslims into the discussion when she talks about her university union and her Islamic society's support of Barbar Ahmad, the British Muslim who was jailed from 2004-2015 and extradited to the USA and to Guantanamo:

> You don't feel safe in terms of your rights as a Muslim in this country. It's like, if someone can suspect that "He's got a beard, he's been on the internet" or "she's encouraging extremism." Anyone can make a statement like that! It's like, well, can intelligence lead you to me tomorrow? Who can question it? It doesn't seem like you can question anything. (57)

The sense of injustice due to discrimination and racism is shared by most characters then, but Amina, Aaishah, and Azra express more disenfranchisement in Britain than others. Perhaps because they are the young and passionate characters of the play they share ideas about how to combat racism rather than just complain about it, and perhaps this explains their insistence on making their Muslim identity clearly shown, and clinging to the idea of 'Muslim solidarity versus the West'. Another technique to combat feeling victimized is searching for any reason to be proud of your identity and searching for any idea that makes you feel superior, in one way or another, to those who claim superiority over you. Amina talks about how Mohammad and Islam gave women equal rights that they did not have at the time and place where Islam was born to which Maysoon responds:

> **Maysoon** Amina, do you not think it's a bit embarrassing for us to go on about the fact that oh, us Muslim women, we've been

liberated 1400 years ago, considering the fact that we lost this liberty literally 1300 years ago.

Amina No, it's just an example to give, you know. (37)

When Amina says 'it's just an example you give' she confirms that she is merely trying to win an argument and help herself feel better about her minority status. She is escaping from a place and a time where she might have fewer rights than other women because she is a Muslim to a place and a time where she would have more rights than other women because she is a Muslim.

As I mentioned earlier, the girls share a number of stories of racism and bigotry that they have been through. Street seems to put these stories in different sections of the play as if to give the impression that this is as important in the life of a Muslim women as misogynistic practices in the name of religion and culture are. Jameela talks about a time when she was working at a shopping center and a big screen was showing news coverage of an Al Qaeda attack, and then people started giving her dirty look because of her hijab. Fareeda talks about daily insults and stereotypes, and Azra tells the story of when a woman spat on her mother's face on the bus after the 7/7 bombings. A significant dramaturgical decision that Street makes to assert this idea of racism and bigotry being present in the lives of all Muslim women is the last change of topic, which is not indicated by Meena reading from the pamphlet this time:

> *The TV crackles to life and from Family Fortunes it switches over to news footage with sound. The Khans register this and look over to it. Meena stands to join them. What we see on TV is the most recent current affairs soundbite on Islam, today's equivalent of Jack Straw refusing to allow women into his surgery wearing niqab, or Nick Griffin on Question Time calling it a "wicked and hateful religion". Meena looks at her pamphlet and screws it up.* (60)

We have clear suggestions that the pamphlet and the misogynistic views in it that Meena reads are rejected by the women in the play, and when Meena first picks it up we see her and the Khans ridiculing it, but none of the characters register any of the quotes that Meena reads. Yet all the Khans acknowledge the footage on TV at the same time because of its importance to them. Racism on one hand and misogyny in the name of religion on the other are present in that moment when Meena watches the TV then looks at the pamphlet in her hand.

There is a great deal of complexity in this play that shows 17 Muslim female characters and each of them is unique and different from the other. The complexity could actually be found

even in the one word title: *Sisters*. This word could refer to the sense of solidarity and connection that Stephanie Street tried to instill in her interviewees in order to encourage them share their stories with her. It could also refer to the sense of solidarity and connection that the play invites the audience to have towards these characters and towards Muslim women as human beings, not as subjects for political debates. It could, on the other hand, be another identity marker and separation technique for some Muslim women when they use the word 'sisters' to refer to other Muslim women.

My Name Is...

My Name Is… is a verbatim play written by Sudha Bhuchar and produced by Tamasha theatre. Tamasha theatre company and Sudha Bhuchar- who co-founded the company in 1989 and has been its co-artistic director since- have a long and rich history of making plays that aim to depict aspects of the life, culture and heritage of the British South-Asian communities. The topic of multiculturalism in Britain has been present in a number of the company's plays like *The Trouble With Asian Men*, *Strictly Dandia,* and *East Is East*. Just like *East Is East*, which is Tamasha's most famous production, *My Name Is*… looks at a marriage between a Muslim Pakistani man and a white British woman who make a life and a family together and then many years later reach a serious crisis in their relationship, largely due to the man's abuse of his position as head of the family. *My Name Is*… was supposed to be, like *East Is East*, a fictional play inspired by a true story, but this did not happen. The real story behind the play took place in 2006[55] when a woman from Scotland called Louise Fairley appeared in a police press conference to report that her 12 year-old daughter, Molly, had disappeared. The British media immediately jumped to the conclusion that the Muslim father abducted his daughter to have her married against her will in Pakistan. When Molly appeared in a press conference in Pakistan and said it was her choice to be there, that life was her mother was like living in hell, and that her name was Misbah and not Molly, two new stories came up in the press: one about Molly/Misbah's loyalty to Scotland and her choosing her Muslim identity over her

[55] http://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/jun/23/pakistan.familyandrelationships

Scottish identity, and one about the mentally disturbed mother who drove her children away from her.

In an introduction to the play text Sudha Bhuchar says that an article in 2007 in the Guardian by Cathy Scott-Clark and Adrian Levy caught her attention because it was basically about the real personal story of how the parents of the girl had met and fell in love when they were young, and how they managed to make a happy family with four children before the influence of society around them finally brought their marriage to an end. (Bhuchar 2104: np) Bhuchar then interviewed the father and the daughter in Pakistan and the mother in Scotland in 2008, and in 2009 Tamasha organized a workshop inviting actors to improvise scenes based on the real stories in the interviews, but Sudha says that she 'felt a deep sense of responsibility about whether I was being true to the real people, or whether I too was another intruder who was going to distort and dilute the family's experience' (Bhuchar 2014: np), and hence was the decision to make the play verbatim.

Bhuchar acknowledges that although the play is verbatim, a lot of editing and writing decisions have been made, and the 130 pages of verbatim material end up being 30 pages of play text: 'Although the story is very well known, I have changed the names to acknowledge the leap that I have made in this imaginative editing of the play' (Bhuchar 2014: np). These editing, directing, and acting decisions that have been made throughout the play are quite powerful and significant, and I want to focus on them and try to find out what insight do they give us about what the play is about.

The play starts with Ghazala/Gaby telling us how heaven looks like in her own fourteen year-old mind: '**Ghazala:** It's like when you sit on the beach on a sunny day and having a picnic. How wicked is that? But 'em… like a million times more better. That's how heaven is, that's how jannat is. Like jannat is jannat. Heaven is heaven.'(3) Then Ghazala goes on to describe how in heaven for each subhanallah (praise be god) uttered by any Muslim 'tree comes out and it's so big that agar, if you get the fastest horse on the earth and if you get him to run under the shadow of the tree, he will run five hundred miles and he still wouldn't get to the other end of the shadow' (3)

In her introduction to the play text and then again in an interview on BBC News[56] Bhuchar seems to focus mostly on the personal story of a couple who fell in love and then fell apart, rather than the political debate around the story. However, the decision to start the play with Ghazla expressing her strong convictions about religion and heaven seems to indicate that ideology and religious convictions are essential elements in the story that is about to unfold. Moreover, the focus on the big tree and its shade in this description of heaven is a very culturally-specific imagination of how it looks like. There are many verses in the Qur'an that offer a material description of heaven and its pleasures, including rivers of water, honey, milk, and liquor, an abundance of fruits, gold and silver, and nymphs. Islamic tradition expanded on what is mentioned in the Qur'an and offered countless accounts of material pleasures that one will get in heaven, and the story of the tree that Ghazala refers to is one of these accounts. It is easy to notice that the list of heavenly rewards consists mainly of things that are either forbidden for Muslims in their earthly lives (liquor, gold and silver- for Muslim men- and countless number of sexual partners in the form of nymphs), and things that are rare and hard to get in Hijaz in the 7th century (honey, water, and fruits). It is probably unfamiliar for someone who comes from the cold, cloudy, and green Britain to associate heaven with shade and trees, but not for someone who comes from a hot desert country, like Pakistan or the Hijaz (Saudi Arabia), and placing this story at the very start of the play even though it has nothing to do with the plot of the play or the conversation that comes exactly after it might be Bhuchar's way of setting out the atmosphere of how different the two worlds that the characters belong to are.

Carrying on with the analysis of the first things characters say in the play one could notice some sort of a pattern. Farhan starts with small talk with his daughter approving her heaven story, about his shy younger daughter, and about cutting down on sugar on doctor's orders, ending the small talk with 'You can pay attention to yourself in Pakistan, you have time…' When he starts telling the story we got another indication that the real issue is the cultural difference that made it inevitable that the relationship would not last regardless of what efforts the individuals in that relationship made: 'Suzy did a good job, I'll give her that. She

[56] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ax5o-A6rZmc

had the zazhbah [passion], I had to try harder cos she's a gori, we are Muslims. We have kalma [the word], Allah and our kitab, holy book. Suzy's culture is when you're sixteen, get out…' (4)

When Suzy starts to talk she describes her loneliness, buying a cat because she needs a heartbeat at home, about the void she feels without her children that only other mothers can relate to, and then she too agrees that a relationship between a White woman and Muslim man is doomed: 'The other day in Glasgow I saw a white woman in a shalwar kameez and I wanted to go up to her and scream, "your family isn't safe!" I had to stop myself.' (4)

These two first speeches of Farhan and Suzy almost foreshadow their journeys throughout the play; Farhan is a Pakistani Muslim who resists at first the idea that he cannot have a white wife, yet he carries that idea deep inside of him, and then it comes to the surface in an extreme manner that ruins the marriage. Suzy is someone who wants a family because she was deprived of it as a teenager, and she goes to extreme lengths and accepts any demands in order to get one, yet she too is reminded violently that she is not who she was trying to be and then breaks up not just with her husband, but also with the religion that she either believed or pretended to have. I will later on try to show how the ideas I claim are foreshadowed in the opening lines of Farhan and Suzy are confirmed in their last few lines in the play as well.

The use of one word, 'gori' is a strong indicator of how the sense of 'them and us' is essential in this play. Gori or gora are hindi words that could mean light skinned or blonde, but it is mostly used with offensive connotations, referring to white people as people who can do things that Asians cannot do because they are more modest or moral. As I pointed out earlier, when Farhan starts talking about Suzy he describes her as a gori and follows that immediately with an insulting generalization about her culture. The belief of white people's moral inferiority to Muslims is on Farhan's mind from the beginning of their relationship and is asserted and strengthened by his mother's mistrust of Suzy regardless of what she does to prove herself to be a good wife and mother, and a good Muslim convert to Farhan and his mother. When Farhan tells his family that he wants to marry a white girl his mother refuses completely, but then agrees with the condition that Suzy must become a Muslim. It is important to clarify here that according to the Qur'an, Muslim men and women are allowed to marry Jews and Christians, and are only not allowed to marry those who the Qur'an calls

the non-believers, i.e. people who do not believe in the one god of the Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In other words, asking Suzy to change her religion was not an Islamic requirement but a family requirement and an identity marker for them, and to assert that point about identity Suzy had to change her name as well to Sajida, a Muslim name. Yet changing religion and name are still not enough and there are still things that the family simply cannot change in her like being white and being Scottish. It did not matter that Sajida had become a full practicing Muslim, brought up her children as committed Muslims and in a way that the father admired, or that she wore the hijab and later the niqab willingly. All of this still does not take away the firm conviction that she is still not pure enough. Farhan's mother would still check if Suzy/Sajida washed her hands or not after going to toilet even after years of being her daughter in law and mother to four of her grandchildren. After a difference in opinion with her mother in law about Suzy having sex during pregnancy, Suzy describes her shock over something that happens for the first time:

> She went away to talk to her cronies to double check as usual. "Sajida's doing this, Sajida's doing that..." she came back with... "You are right."
>
> Holy smokes! How many times have I heard, "You're right" but the fact of being
>
> constantly disbelieved you know... "You can't be right. You're white." (Bhuchar 2014: 24)

This internalised mistrust and disrespect of Suzy because she is white came to surface when the family was on pilgrimage to Mecca and Suzy decides after discussion and after reading a lot about the issue that she does not need to cover her face there. It is a common practice among Muslims that even women who usually cover their faces may not do so in Al-Ka'ba in Mecca because it is considered the purest place on earth where people go to cleans their souls and rid them of any earthly desires, so no one should, in theory, be interested in gazing at a woman's face while at Al-Ka'ba. Yet even a comment from a random boy during the pilgrimage who says to Farhan 'your wife should cover her face' brings to the surface Farhan's subconscious shame that his wife is white. He shouts at her angrily:

> **Farhan** (to **Suzy**) I told you, you should be wearing it... I told you... you should be covered, your face should be covered.'

> **Suzy** Later, I went and sat beside the Kaaba... with everything on in the heat... gloves, socks and a double veil so nobody could see I was white... and I just... I had a wee pocket Koran with a zip on it and that was my only peace... my only escape. (26)

Back in the UK after the pilgrimage, Farhan's demands from Suzy increase, and his scrutiny of her behaviour grows. In a very intense scene that is hard to watch, Farhan lashes out at Suzy because of their daughters' clothes and he calls her a bad mother. When she refuses to be called a bad mother Farhan gets angrier, grabs her violently and shouts at her, ordering her to stop having her only friend over at the house because of her bad influence. Later the same night Suzy has a nervous breakdown that leaves her in a mental hospital for two months. At this point Suzy tells Farhan that she is no longer Muslim, that there is no Sajida anymore, and she asks for divorce. In his last attempt to save the marriage Farhan says to Suzy 'Do you want them to grow up being goras and goris? You've done a good job.' (30) Even when he is trying to win her back he cannot hide that he thinks white people are immoral and inferior. Her best achievement for him is that she raised the children well despite the fact that she is white.

One important element of the play is the engaging acting style. The settings is divided in two halves: stage left is in Farhan's house in Pakistan, we have an arm chair that Farhan sits on most of the time, a coffee table and a rug on the floor where Ghazala sits most of the time. Stage right is a living room in Suzy's flat and there is a couch that mostly Suzy sits on, but is also used by Farhan when the characters interact. Although the characters are supposed to be talking to an interviewer and are thousands of miles away, yet they borrow each other's words when one character is narrating a part of the story that another character takes part in. This acting out of verbatim material in an interactive way helped the audience identify with the characters more in key moments of the play. First, when Farhan and Suzy tell their love story the interaction between the two characters helps the audience really go beyond the idea of a Pakistani man and a White Scottish girl and focus only on two people in love. Later on, Suzy puts on the hijab while she is telling the audience about the happy days of the marriage, when they no longer lived with Farhan's mother and when she came to think of Islam as her religion and not just something she needs to say or do to satisfy Farhan and his family. The mere act of putting on a hijab was very significant because although seeing a character wearing hijab is not rare, yet seeing one putting it on is rare and draws the audience more into the personal and intimate details of this character's life. This effect carries on later

when we see Suzy puts on the niqab this time, and as she completely covers her face, except the eyes, she says 'I felt claustrophobic. A walking target.' (21) This ominously foreshadows a change in the mood in the play, and the uneasiness and suffocation that the character describes and acts out is soon manifested in the plot. Suzy talks, while still wearing the niqab, about the harassment and abuse she went through for being a white Muslim, this time from white men:

> In my flip-flops, people could see I had white feet and white hands and of course my blue eyes. "Are you a Paki?" "You blackie? You White? Hey Paki B? Are you white or are you black?" Batman... (*imitating the music from Batman*.) "Batman!"
>
> ...
>
> Walking past pubs in the summer and the doors were open and this uproar would start and they'd all come running out. My heart would be in my mouth. I'd walk quicker. Omar was with me one day on his bike and these young boys started throwing mud at me, stones... "Run home, darling. Take your bike and go home." He was, "No, mama, I..l stay with you." "Go home. Go home!" I couldn't bear to have my son see the abuse his mother had to go through on a daily basis. (22)

Listening to Suzy tell the story adds to the influence it has on the audience because Karen Bartke portrays passionately with her teary eyes and her shaky and terrified voice- while still in her niqab- the fear and horror of a mother trying to escape verbal and physical abuse and trying protect her children from seeing this. This scene also brings to the attention an important underlying element in the story of Farhan and Suzy, which is bigotry and racism towards Muslims and Asians in the UK. Although the abuse we are told about in the play happens with Suzy and not Farhan, yet it is a powerful reminder that being a discriminated minority has always been an open wound for Muslim Pakistanis in the UK. Farhan talks at the beginning of the play about the institutional racism when the media immediately jump to conclusions about the disappearance of his daughter claiming that her fundamental father kidnapped her and will force her to marry, but then the scene when Suzy is abused for wearing niqab brings a stronger and visceral reaction from the audience to the issue of bigotry and racism against Muslims in the UK.

This brings me back to the last few lines of the play, and as I said earlier the main issues of the play are foreshadowed in the very first few lines that Farhan and Suzy say, and they are

reiterated in the final lines they say. For Farhan, the problem was neither Suzy nor him; it was always the fact that he was not welcome as a Pakistani Muslim in Britain:

> Papa has this running joke like when we're in the park or driving... **Farhan** (*playing out the joke*) What's that? Can you hear anything? I can't hear it. I can't hear anyone calling me Paki can you? See anyone throwing stones? (41)

After this joke Farhan starts singing in Urdu and Ghazala joins him, and just like he starts the play talking about his happiness in Pakistan where he can take care of himself, he finishes it with an assertion that he is at home in Pakistan where he belongs, not in the UK where he is in diaspora and a state of inferiority. Farhan projects his minority status and his feeling of injustice and inferiority in the UK on his wife, and he subjects her to the same injustice that he feels is done to him.

For Suzy, the dilemma at the start of the play is of a mother who was separated from her children, and the play ends with the same theme, this time on a positive note. The play closes with the three characters sitting and looking pensive, while we hear an audio recording of Sudha Bhuchar speaking in 2014 to Molly and Louise, the daughter and mother on whose stories the play is based, after Molly has moved back to live with her mother in Scotland:

> Sudha: And what does it feel looking at all these press cuttings now you're back together?
>
> Mother: I just want to cry.
>
> Girl: It was such a horrible time and I know… I know all the things I got told to say… it's just I feel so bad cos I feel like… I don't know how you're saying about it in the play… It's just a girl stuck in two different… It's just so hard cos I love Mama and Papa. I just wanna say that I'm gonna be changing my name like officially… It's kid of ironic isn't it? It's like that song by Eminem…

She starts singing 'My Name Is' by Eminem… and her mother joins in. Lots of laughter and fun. (42)

Burq Off!

Burq Off! is an autobiographic one woman comedy that depicts key moments and events of the life of the writer and sole performer of the play, Nadia Manzoor. Manzoor is not only the writer and performer of this play, but she is also the founder of the theatre company that produced it, Paprika Productions, an all-female production company based in New York, USA. Manzoor starts and ends the play as a narrator of her own story, but throughout the play she switches between narrating and acting parts of her story. To avoid confusion in this analysis between Nadia Manzoor the author and performer and Nadia Manzoor the character, I am referring to the real Nadia as Manzoor, and to the character as Young Nadia, Teen Nadia, Adult Nadia, or just Nadia. Manzoor plays twenty one characters in total in this play, and the change from one character to another is always marked by change in the tone of the voice and other bodily and facial gestures that unmistakably reflect and exaggerate the characteristics of each character. The father is always a god-like figure who gives orders and aims to implement his authority and control over his family through his commanding and intimidating voice and attitude. The mother is kind and loving; she is a peace-keeper in the family and is always positive even when she is visibly in great pain because of her cancer and yet she maintains the celebratory atmosphere every time Nadia comes home from university on a weekend. The Muslim 'sisters' at the Manchester Muslim Women's Association, where Nadia attended weekly meetings during her university just to please her father, are characterised as highly political and serious, and to some extent holier-than-thou and patronising towards the only non-hijabi member of the group, Nadia. The Muslim 'brothers' in the group of fundamental Muslim young men that Nadia's twin brother, Khurram, joins are characterised as angry and ignorant group of young men who seem and sound more like gangsters than religious and pious people. Manzoor's grandparents' advice for Young Nadia to be a good Muslim and not an English are some sort of comical propaganda:

> **Dada**[57]: (Stroking his bold spot) Repeat after me. Baba aam laya.[58]No more English coming from your mouth. Baba ne aam kaya.[59]They don't even wash their bottoms after they go to the toilet. Baba ne aam chupaya.[60]Nietzsche said, anybody who is insufficient should be shot. Filthy.

[57] Grandfather
[58] Baba bought a mango
[59] Baba ate a mango
[60] Baba hid the mango

[...]

Dadi[61]: (sitting in the SL chair, her index finger twirling menacingly) If you don't cover your hair now, when you die. It will tie around your neck and strangle you in your grave, then you will die, then you will wake up, then it will strangle you again, and you will die, and it will keep strangling you again and again and there will be no end. This is why we do not look at white people. Otherwise you will turn into a grapefruit like Cinderella. (Manzoor 2014: 9)

Finally, the Islamic teachers that are hired to 'really kick the English out of' Nadia and her brother are characterized as extremely unpleasant and on a mission to make the kids afraid of any form of transgression. First, a frowning lady who uses guilt and fear, and even tears, to convince Nadia and Khurram how wrong and forbidden many things that English people do are. She is almost neurotic in the way she uses facial expressions and signs an X by crossing her hands every time she tells them that something is haram or forbidden. Then we have a proper Islamic teacher, or Molvi Saab, who is portrayed as a tyrannical and angry man who never hesitates to slap anyone who asks questions instead of accepting the instructions blindly. Quickly though Manzoor makes it clear that it is not just the teacher's method of teaching religion that she has problem with, but also his hypocrisy. Seven-year-old Nadia finds a porn magazine in her father's briefcase and she shows it to the Molvi Saab, he sends her out of the room and masturbates while looking at the images in the magazine. This is one of a number of scenes that I will analyze further later on where Manzoor's delivery of the message is probably more significant than the message itself. This performance embodies a very wide range of possible approaches, and their impossibility and irreconcilability, within the body of one performer in order to highlight the lived experience of conflicting identities and scenarios in the assimilation debate for British Muslim women, especially of Manzoor's generation.

The scenes where Nadia's grandparents give her those controversial pieces of advice and opinions on English people and hijab, and the Islamic teachers' scenes come early in the play, and one could be thinking at this point that this is going to be another play about the clash between old and young British Asian generations, which is a common topic in British Asian theatre. Manzoor, however, makes it clear very quickly that the depiction and treatment of

[61] Grandmother

the issue is going to be different here, at least different to the other plays I study in this thesis, in its strong sense of sarcasm, and its shocking, in South-Asian standards, openness when talking about sex and representing it, and finally in its willingness to be un-political in the choice of words when criticising some aspects of her life as a British Muslim girl. I will discuss a number of examples on how sarcasm and shock have been used by Manzoor to talk about different sensitive topics in this play.

Seven-year-old Nadia is curious about sex after sneakily peeking while her mom was watching *Dallas.* She then decides to write a letter to her classmate, Adam, proposing that they 'do sex'. Nadia then innocently gives the letter to her father to read it, and his reaction is expectedly furious. We know from earlier that in Nadia's family they refer to vagina as 'shame shame', so when he asks while he's shouting at his daughter 'where is your shame', she looks confused and points at her vagina and says 'Abbu? Shame shame?' and then he slaps her and she falls to the ground.

> **Narrator**: That's when I started thinking: this sexual repressive crap wouldn't be happening to me if I were English. The English were evolved. Katie embraced her shame shame, in fact she inserted little plastic beads into her shame shame, and popped them out into the toilet as a game, and her mother, she laughed because she was English! All the girls in my school where English, and they ran about singing English nursery rhymes I'd never heard of. (*she crosses her hands, and skips in a circle singing*) "Ooh, we're English, we're English and we all drink tea, ooh we're English we're English and she's a Paki.
>
> I hated being a Paki. Pakistanis attracted a lot of unnecessary attention. Like take, my Aunty Ji, Who ate with her hands. In posh restaurants! Then she used her dupatta[62] to clean up anything that had been spilled.
>
> [....]
> English women didn't do this shit. They cleaned things with pretty napkins, not their clothes! I wanted to be English! (Manzoor 2014: 7-8)

Right after this scene we see Young Nadia inventing stories about spending Christmas in L.A. to her friend's mom- who is described as posh, 'more blond and more English' than her daughter, and 'a little ignorant'. Young Nadia also gives her brother an English name, jumps with excitement when Katie's mom says she should come for tea (with a stress on 'tea' in

[62] Headscarf

Nadia's excitement) before her mother comes and Nadia feels embarrassed with her traditional Pakistani dress.

What we have here and is common in many British Asian plays is the clash between generations in the traditional Muslim British family, especially around anything that has to do with sex and the female body. What is also very common is how the sense of being different and an outsider always has two elements contributing to it: a traditional family that pulls the children away from the bigger British society they live in and into the family and the Muslim community, and a White English surrounding that keeps pushing them away from the centre and reminding them that they do not belong there. The element that I find unusual and very significant though is the delivery of these messages. Manzoor does not seem to care about being politically correct or sensitive and political about the way she chooses how to word and voice out the thoughts of her child or teen self on stage. To actually say 'I hated being a Paki' and 'I wanted to be English' in the play seems like a statement of intent at this early part of the play; that this is how she Manzoor felt as a child and how she believes many other Pakistani girls have felt, and she wants to represent that, unedited and unpolished. The rest of the play does indeed offer a nuanced and subtle look at the problem of identity crisis for young Muslim females in Britain, and from many angles, but these bold statements at the early minutes of the play set a different tone to what I am used to when I watch or read plays about British Muslim women.

I felt as I watched the play that Manzoor wanted, instead of focusing primarily on the political and cultural debate around the issues she raises, to really focus on the intimacy and vulnerability and raw qualities of what a young liberal British Muslim female who comes from a conservative family really feels when she faces the dichotomies and dualities of her two lives in and outside home every day, and how this identity crisis starts formulating at a very young age. I did not draw my conclusions about Manzoor's intent to shock only from the straightforward language; there are also the two scenes where her performance is also meant to shock. The first scene is when the Molvi Saab takes the porn magazine from Young Nadia, sends her outside the room, and instead of destroying the magazine or throwing it in a pin he starts looking at the pictures, starts touching himself, masturbates and climaxes with funny noises and moans. Manzoor here is then going a step further than just criticising the backward and fundamental views of some Islamic teachers in Britain and actually presenting one who

is a pervert. Moreover, she makes sure through the way she acts this scene that the obscene and vulgar nature of it is emphasized. Criticising Islamic teachers and depicting them as violent and backward is not uncommon in British Asian theatre, but to represent them as sexual perverts, and to act this out in an explicit way by an actress is a clear sign that the shock factor really *is* a message in itself here, and not just a tool to convey a message.

The other important scene that I want to analyze provides an interesting mix of comedy and drama, and of course shock. It is the scene when Nadia loses her virginity to her Irish boyfriend, Brendan. We are now in Nadia's university dorm room, and the table is turned vertically to become a bed:

> **Nadia**: Brend, I want to be naked with you. Forever.
>
> **Brendan:** Nod, you're the girl of my dreams, like.
>
> **Nadia**: I know, let's do sex.
>
> **Brendan**: Nod, it's not an active ver, like, and it's a big deal. It's your first time.
>
> **Nadia**: Brend, I'm ready.
>
> **Brendan:** (*He climbs up onto the bed, and on top of her. The Dallas theme song is heard, increasing in volume. The sound of sex moans can be heard, but wait, that's them. It is intimate, and sweet, and awkward, and hilarious*) Oh Nod. I love you so much. I love you soo much. Princess, princess. Jesus Mary and Joseph and the little donkey. (*He notices she is bleeding, and jumps off the bed*) Fuck me! Nod, are you alright? You're bleeding everywhere, what did I do?
>
> **Nadia:** Brend. I don't know. I'm sorry. (25)

This play is the only one among the plays I am studying in this thesis, and the other plays I have watched in the last five years that depict the stories of Muslim women that shows sex so mimetically and directly. In fact, other than one kiss in Tamasha's *Blood*, written by Emtiaz Hussein, there is not even the slightest of physical intimacy in any of the twelve plays I have watched in the last 5 years whose themes are around British Muslim women. This observation necessitates the questioning of the influence, direct or indirect, that norms and expectations of what is culturally accepted play even in the writing and production of theatre written about British Muslim women. Manzoor is different in this regards. Not only does she depict sex mimetically and vividly, but she makes sure that through the way she acts it out she destroys the pedestal over which sex has been placed in her community. It did work on me as an

audience member because as it started to become clear that we were about to watch the losing virginity scene I expected the atmosphere to turn sombre and dramatic because I have never seen this in a play with Muslim character, and I dare say the atmosphere among the audience was similar too. Manzoor immediately subverted our expectations because instead of romantic and tensed, Brendan got right to it, and quickly became funny and a little bit farcical.

The importance of this scene is that it comes as a culmination of many examples and scenes throughout the play that Manzoor uses to make a point about the lack of sexual expression or even sexual education in the traditional Muslim family. Manzoor introduces the issue in the very first scene:

> **Narrator**: Ammi and Abbu had presented me with my path, straight and defined, with only one possible destination. You'd think, with such a prime directive of making a man ver, ver happy, that you might get the Pakistani parents to teach their girls a thing or two about the equipment needed, like say the vagina!
>
> **Ammi**: Jaanu, we don't say that word. Beta, we say, shame shame.
>
> **Narrator**: You see, vaginas don't exist in Pakistani homes. Sex is the last topic of conversation, in fact it's not even a topic of conversation. There is no sex in Pakistani homes. Instead there's this.
>
> […]
> *A short Bollywood dance is performed, stylized and bold, first as a man, then as a woman. As the woman completes her final spin, she finds she is holding an infant, surprised and delighted, she exclaims* "A baby!"
>
> **Narrator**: That's what they did in Bollywood movies, that's how they made their Bollywood babies, and Bollywood was one of the only things I was allowed to watch. Everything else was forbidden, like Ammi's favorite American TV show, Dallas. (5)

From that point onwards, we see many examples on how taboo sex is in this family and in traditional Muslim families in general, and how this shadow of shame around it leads to unhealthy practices and frustration among the youth, especially female. After Teen Nadia has her first period her father tells her she cannot play with boys or play outside anymore, and the other sex starts becoming alien to her. That is why when their relatives from Pakistan visit, Teen Nadia is allowed to interact with boys for the first time, and she falls in love with her cousin Mustafa. After all the build-up to how important chastity is and how forbidden sex

before marriage is for a traditional Muslim family, the losing of virginity scene seemed to me as another shock that is in itself a message. After Nadia shared with us the ludicrous way in which Pakistani Bollywood dances around the idea of sex and how this reflects the way in which a traditional Pakistani family would refuse to talk about sex to the extent that it is shameful to pronounce the word vagina, here she is acting out her first sexual experience in a way that is both comical and explicit, thus destroying the exaggerated sanctity around the subject of sex.

Manzoor uses symbolism very effectively in the play either to show the two sides for one internal conflict that Nadia goes through, or to show a moment of decision and change in Nadia's life. Teen Nadia goes to the hajj (the pilgrimage to Mecca) with her family, and there she wears the burqa for the first time in her life. Nadia says 'I stepped out, into the dusty streets of Mecca. I was a Muslim in a Burqa.' (12) Then, she comes from one corner of the stage, eerie music, spot light on her and dimmed light on the stage, she walks very awkwardly and is obviously self-conscious, and she starts moving her hands which are covered with the burqa as if she is discovering now that she is actually completely covered. Then suddenly, she becomes comfortable, the music changes to happy dance music, and Nadia dances around excitedly, including over the table. At a later stage in the play Adult Nadia lies to her parents about spending a week at Katy's when actually they were going together to Majorca. In Majorca, Katy convinces her to get rid of the burqini[63] that her mother brought her from Pakistan and wear a bikini. The moment in the burqa in Mecca is repeated again: 'I tied the three pieces of string around my boobs and stepped out, onto the sandy beaches of Majorca. I was a Muslim in a bikini.' (24) Nadia then comes from the other corner of the stage walking as awkwardly as she did in Mecca, looking very embarrassed, trying to hide her breast with her hands, and pulling down her bikini bottoms to cover more of her bum, while the spotlight is on her and the same eerie music of Mecca scene is playing. Then again mirroring the scene from Mecca, she suddenly becomes comfortable and repeats the same excited dance from before. Manzoor is clearly trying to depict here the two extremes that a young British Muslim female is torn between. Does she follow the path of piety and chastity that Islam requires, or does she follow the sexually liberal path of her White English friends. The two scenes also depict the fact that both options could be uncomfortable for her. This probably has to do with

[63] Burqini is an 'Islamic' swimsuit that covers the entire body. The word is a mix between burqa and bikini.

her feeling that any slight deviation from tradition with regards to sexuality would be considered by her family as a grave transgression against the religion and the family honour, and therefore she feels that her choices are either black or white, and there no other options in the middle. Assimilation is visible and legible on the bodies of Muslim women, through clothing. Nadia still identifies herself as a Muslim although in a bikini, and this brings to mind a very common question among Muslims: does the dress code not impact on religious affiliation oridentity? This question is included in the bigger question of whether or not the ideological and spiritual element of Islam are enough for someone to identify as Muslim, or does one lose the identity if they do not adhere to the practices and the outwardly manifestations of the Islamic identity? This is especially significant in non-Muslim countries where the dress code is seen as a mechanism of assimilation, or a mechanism of assertion of identity. In other words, for a female member of a cultural minority group like Muslim Pakistanis in the UK, the dress code as more than just a personal choice, but an identity marker of extra importance.

Another symbolic element in the play is the scarf that never leaves Nadia's body until the very end. It is a very versatile piece of fabric that Manzoor uses as a hijab (some characters wear it more tightly and conservatively than others), and as a burqa. She also ties it around her body to become a bikini, she wears it around her head in a gangster style when she plays one of the Muslim brothers, and she uses it in a few more ways. All these different functions of the scarf, together with the fact that she obviously never takes it off her completely until the very end seem to represent the multiple personalities that Nadia had to be in her life: Nadia the shy and innocent conservative Muslim girl, and Nadia the liberal and adventurous young woman who is not afraid to take the risks and go to extremes to try something new. In fact, Nadia keeps reminding us throughout the play how she only could live her life through deceit and lies to her parents, and how this double life she had to live hurt her and deprived her of the chance to share the most important moments of her love life with her mother. At the moment when Brendan jumps off the bed after he notices that Nadia is bleeding when they have sex for the first time, her mother calls:

> **Nadia**: … Ammi. It's like five in the morning. What's wrong? Why are you crying? What dream?

> **Ammi**: Jaanu, there was blood everywhere, and you were bleeding, and there was a dead baby. Beta, please come home. Please come home!
>
> **Nadia**: Ammi, it's just a dream. (*she hangs up, and wraps herself in Brendan's arms*) Brend.
>
> **Narrator**: I wanted to tell Ammi she was psychic, but instead I let her believe she was crazy. (25)

This conflict of having to live a lie and hide her real life from her mother, and the function that the piece of cloth plays all come together very clearly in the final scene, and in the use of the most powerful symbolism in the play in my view, which is where the play starts and ends. When the play starts and Manzoor enters the stage she walks straight to the back of the stage where pieces of cloth form a wall and a window in it, Nadia looks out through the window then turns around and addresses the audience: 'The first thing I wanted to be was an astronaut. I knew there was something important out there, something I had to find, and the only way I'd be able to find it was if I left, through my window. The window was where the universe began.' (4) Throughout the play, this window was central for a lot of the action either representing daydreams and hope for some kind of change in her life, or representing sneaking and stealing moments of happiness without her parents' knowledge. When Brendan wants to come to Nadia's room he comes through the window, all wrapped up with layers of cloth so that others do not know a guy came to her room, and when he tells her he loves her and asks her to marry him, instead of feeling excited and happy she feels terrified because her mother calls and asks her to look through the window, only to discover that her family came to surprise her with a visit. In the last scene of the play Nadia is sitting on the table with her brother and father after her mother dies, and after a fight with her brother Nadia reaches her moment of resolution:

> When Ammi left, so did a part of myself. I knew she was soaring now, I knew she was free, and in her leaving, I found the strength to do the same.
> I knew Abbu loved me, I knew Khurram loved me, but they loved me for who they thought I should be, and not for who I really was. I couldn't continue lying to the people I loved the most, and so I left. (*She removes the scarf she was wearing in a myriad forms and costumes, throughout the play. She drapes it on the chair.)* Not through imagination and out of the window, not by covering myself up in layers of cloth, nor by taking it all off. (*She walks upstage to the window, she releases a piece of cloth, and the window becomes a door*.) But through the front door, of my home, one foot in front of the other, with only one possible destination. (30)

It is clear to see the nuanced and sophisticated depiction of the identity crisis of a young British Muslim female that I mentioned earlier in this analysis in the symbolic examples I have discussed above. The contrast between the serious and deep nature of these elements of the play, especially the last part of it, and between the comedy, the shrewd sarcasm, and the explicit and shocking scenes throughout the play is not confusing or contradictory for me. Manzoor clearly did not want just another play that treads carefully when discussing sensitive issues; she wanted a play that first bursts the bubble of taboo around certain issues before actually presenting the arguments. This bubble of taboos is what makes the treatment in the other plays I study very careful, serious, sensitively and politically shaped, and sometimes very quick when the topic is sex, abusive Islamic teachers, or the sense of non-belonging felt by some British Muslim girls. In *Burq Off!* the treatment of these topics is sarcastic, intimate, detailed, and provocatively shocking. The priority of this play is not to present a coherent and solid argument, but to build the argument on the private and honest, the non-politically-correct, the unsophisticated, and the culturally and racially insensitive thoughts of one girl. To what extent are these thoughts representing of what other British Muslim girls think is another question that cannot be answered, and Manzoor does not seem to even want to answer it.

Conclusion

In this thesis I study eight plays that are centrally concerned with the representation of British Muslim women's experience. I have used a mode of analysis that I have framed as Islamic feminisms, although not all of these playwrights would consider themselves feminists nor Islamic feminists as I frame the term. In the process of this research project I have watched or read a number of other plays that I might have considered, such as *The British Ambassador's Belly Dancer* by Nadira and Craig Murray (2008), *The House of Bilquis Bibi* by Sudha Bhuchar (2010), *Hens* by Alia Bano (2010), and *Blood* by Emteaz Hussain (2015). I make reference to some of them in the thesis but I do not study them in detail for practical reasons; I could not analyse all 12 of them, so I chose the eight plays that are more clearly articulate about the three major topics I research in my thesis: hijab, position of women in the Muslim family, and integration of Muslim women in the British society.

My immediate observations about the plays considered in detail, and this broader corpus of British plays on Muslim women, are that most of them are written by female writers, many of whom are new to playwriting. The plays studied here are the first or second play from each writer. All of the writers are from an Asian or British-Asian background, and all but one (Nadira Murray) write from a British South-Asian context. The overwhelming majority of the characters are Pakistani or are married to Pakistani men. These give a coherent focus to the plays treatment of the key issues. Finally, it is significant that all but one are written after the 9/11 and 7/7 attacks and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and emerge during the era of the so-called war on terror and the increased politicisation of the Muslim presence in the UK. Interestingly enough, there is next to no scholarly or critical attention given to them. Other than *East is East* and its writer, I could not find in the last five years any scholarly research or article about these playwrights or their plays. I could only find theatre reviews, and not a lot of those either. This is curious given that the topic of Muslim women is a subject for heated political and cultural debates in this country, yet when a good number of playwrights offer an alternative method for this debate through theatre they do not find similar attention from, say, the media, for example.

My analysis of these authors' experiences of writing and producing these plays, and the content they concentrate on leads me to conclude that there is indeed an emerging genre in British theatre that is trying to find its place. It is a genre of Muslim feminist new writing that is trying to balance the narratives and debates about Muslim women that have been hijacked by politics, the so-called religious and community leaders, and the sensationalist media. Just as Islamic feminists are not necessarily Muslim, Muslim feminist plays are not necessarily written by Muslim playwrights. I know that Stephanie Street, Atiha Sen Gupta and Sudha Bhuchar, for example, are not Muslim. These plays are trying to tell stories of women and families who happen to be Muslim, in order to shed light on the individuals beyond the perspectives of the media and politics. This is not to say that these plays completely ignored politics and communal issues, but they look at them from the perspective of individuals, what it means to them on a personal level, and how it affects their daily life. *What Fatima Did* is, in parts, a dramatised debate, especially in the classroom discussion scene. The dialogues show both the liberal and politically sensitive views of the teacher, the libertarian views of the male students, and the almost militant anti-hijab views of Aisha and Rukhsana, the two female Muslim characters that appear in the play. But these debates are not the focus of the play; instead the focus is on the effects of Fatima's hijab on her life and relationships with other. *Sisters* is divided into sections by topics, and some of them are highly political, but here too there is clear focus on the effects of these political issues on the lives of Muslim women. We are presented with nuanced and very political discussions on terrorism, Islamophobia, and the hijab, but each one of these discussions is accompanied by a moving personal story that directs our attention to the daily manifestations of these topics on the daily lives of Muslim women instead of focusing on which side of the argument is right or wrong.

The social stereotypes of Muslim women as being helpless victims who have no say in their lives and achieve nothing more than cooking good curries and samosas are challenged too. The stereotypes are not challenged by stubbornly refusing to acknowledge that oppressed Muslim women do exist, but the presentation of the problem is different. The mainstream media's representation of Muslim women is sensationalist and generalist, and it creates a subconscious link between Muslim women and oppression, which in a way contributes to their victimization and strips away their individuality and agency. These plays subvert that image by balancing the representation of passive and active Muslim women, as in *Deadeye*

(the passive Zainab and the active Deema), and *Burq Off!* (again passive mother and passive young Nadia, then the active mature Nadia). *Sisters* is special in its portrayal of active and empowered Muslim women because it shows that this activity and empowerment could lead in the direction of isolation and enmity towards society (all the students except Maysoon), economic and social agency but without any sense of national belonging (Meena), or towards economic and social agency with a deep sense of belonging (the liberal hijabi student Maysoon, the football player, the lesbian activist, the Sufi, the women's rights campaigner). The plays show the racial, national and economic factors that contribute to the characters' oppression as women, thus making clear that the debate is deeper than it just being a Muslim problem. We can see this in *East Is East, Deadeye, Sisters*, and *My Name Is*... This does not mean that the playwrights are trying to exonerate religion; we see clear indictment of religious misogynistic practices in most of the plays, but they show how these practices work within and are facilitated by other economic and racial factors.

Although I have chosen certain plays to be studied under each topic, but in most cases each of the plays addresses all three topics, or at least one more topic than the one of the chapter in which it appears. The division was for the same practical reason that made me exclude other excellent plays from my thesis, and that is the clear articulation of and focus on the specific topics of my research. Both *Deadeye*, and *East Is East* have a lot of insight into the reasons behind, and the outcomes of the isolation of some Muslim families, and their lack of openness on the wider British society. Likewise, *Sisters*, *My Name Is…* and *Burq Off!* all offer subtle commentary on the position of women in Muslim families. The topic that is more clearly present in the three chapters and in six out of the eight plays is hijab. I do not think the reason for this is that the playwrights are following an easy stereotypical stock-image of Muslim woman as necessarily wearing hijab. I believe the strong presence of hijab is because it is the most obvious visual identity marker of Muslim women (as a group of people rather than individuals), and so it triggers out two main problems for Muslim women: Islamophobic abuse and discrimination, and pressure from the Muslim community/family to wear it as a sign of being good Muslim. In other words, it is not hijab, but these two issues that are in almost every play on Muslim women. As I point out in the section*: Multiculturalism, Liberalism, Feminism and Racism* in chapter three, because hijab is the easiest way to identify Muslim women, it attracts unwanted attention from racists and bigots. We see reference to

this problem in *Shades*, *What Fatima Did*, *My Name Is..* and *Sisters*. We see reference to the pressure of wearing hijab, or the extreme version of it, the niqab, in *Shades*, *My name Is…*, *Burq Off!,* and *Sisters*. Finally, in *Shades*, *What Fatima Did*, *Sweet Cider*, *Sisters*, *My Name Is*…, and *Burq Off!* we see the recurrent theme of wearing hijab as a political statement, either as a response to Islamophobia by asserting one's identity through hijab, or to feel part of a group and of a bigger idea to help the Muslim woman deal with her minority and inferior status.

What this emerging genre of new Muslim feminist plays still lacks, in my observation, is the shock factor and the sense of leading a radical avant-garde in both form and content, especially form. Although *Sweet Cider* is deeply moving in its portrayal of the horrors and the abandonment that the girls who escape from their families experience, and although we do see one of the ultimate taboos in the Muslim communities, homosexuality, in *Shades*, *Sisters* and *Sweet Cider*, yet I still feel that there is a missed opportunity here. The psychological barriers in societies around talking about certain taboo subjects need more than calm and reasonable discussion- as essential as calm and reasonable discussion as it is. The bubble of seriousness and sanctity around certain topics needs to be burst, and theatre can help do that by sometimes shaking us vehemently as audience and outraging us in a performance that respects no boundaries. Apart from *Burq Off!,* I did not feel this kind of intentional shock factor in any of the plays. This, of course, is a comment on the genre collectively, rather than the plays individually. Another limitation with Muslim feminist plays is that they hardly address the issues of British Muslim women in the broader context of Muslims who are not from a Pakistani or British South-Asian background. As mentioned in chapter three, over 50% of Muslims in the UK are from Pakistani background, but even with that in mind the representation of Muslim women from Pakistani heritage in contemporary British theatre is still disproportionate. Although there are many similarities between the experiences of Muslim women anywhere, but not to find a single play where the main character is an Afghan, Iraqi, Nigerian, or Somali woman is a limitation of the genre in general.

One explanation for the responsible and politically-correct characteristics of most of these plays, and the overwhelming presence of women from Pakistani background might be that many of these plays are sponsored by theatre venues that make sure they produce a certain number of 'minority' plays in order to tick the box of diversity. Again, I am not trying to link this argument to the plays individually. What I am suggesting is that maybe due to the fact

that minority theatre, including Muslim theatre, is very much dependant on the politically and commercially driven funding and commissioning from art councils and theatre venues, this might have created a general atmosphere of careful depiction of these minority communities, or it may have affected the selection process of the plays that they fund. Theatres probably do not want a repeat of what happened when Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti's play, *Behzti*, was cancelled before it even premiered because of protests and rioting by some members of the Sikh community in Birmingham.

Stephanie Street acknowledged the box-ticking in the commissioning of minority plays in the UK when I interviewed her in 2012:

> I think there is an enormous amount of ticking boxes that happens in programming minority work. Because we live in a pluralistic, multicultural society, and the Arts Council dictates, pretty much dictates that a certain level of representation has to exist in work that they fund. So theatres actually have to do it. I am not entirely… well, no, I'm being diplomatic. A lot of them don't do it the right way in my opinion. They do it just to go, 'Yes, we've done a show about an Asian community. We've done that. We've discharged our responsibility for this calendar year.' But they don't always seek the most rigorous ways of looking at these communities. (Street 2012)

In an interview I did with Atiha Sen Gupta in 2012, she too talked about the sense of political rather than artistic criteria in the selection of plays by Hampstead:

> there is a double standard because I'm not Muslim, and I was writing a Muslim play, and I was being presumptuous enough to say, I have the right to write about this. I'm only saying this now in hindsight because I've now written another play set in Israel about a Jewish Israeli boy and his family. And this play is not being put on anywhere. And it's a good play, in my opinion. Hampstead haven't accepted it, and they've given me a commission after they read this play, and they said, 'It's good, it's good, it's good.' They said, 'We're not going to do it.' and then they turned around and said, 'But here's a commission to write any other play.' So it's not about the play, the Israeli play. It's about, I think it's politically... untouchable... I think it's a kind of racism on the part of the establishment because I'm not Muslim, and yet I have the right, in their eyes, to write a play about Muslims, whether that be negative, critical, whatever. And yet, I'm not allowed to be critical or negative about Israel or a Jewish family in Israel because I'm not Jewish. (Sen Gupta 2012)

What Sen Gupta and Street are talking about here begs two big questions: are theatres in this country genuinely trying to boost the dialogue within and about Muslim communities, or are they funding these plays because of the publicity and commercial appeal of talking about something as 'trendy' as Muslim women in the UK? The second question is whether the race

or religion of a white playwright is going to play a role in the reception of their work as much as race and religion play a role in the reception of a non-White playwright? What I am talking about here is the tendency to appreciate the writing of minorities as long as they are writing about these minorities, and this is something Sen Gupta talks about again in an interview in 2013 with her and her mother, author and activist Rahila Gupta. She talks about how white writers do not have to prove their authenticity when they write about minorities or other nations, whereas writers from minorities are 'still seen through the prism of race by critics and by the theatre establishments' and are mostly applauded and 'celebrated for reflecting the black condition, or the Asian tradition, or the Chinese condition.'[64]

This leads to another big discussion about whether or not the existence of Asian theatre companies and the existence of the boxes for minorities that theatre venues commission plays in order to tick is good or bad for Asian playwrights. The answer that Rahila Gupta offers in the same interview with her daughter is that 'you're more likely to get work sometimes because it fulfils somebody's quotas... so they've ticked a box, and you want to get past the box.. you need the box and then you break the boundaries.'[65] This realistic approach has actually worked in some cases, namely with Alia Bano, Stephanie Street and Atiha Sen Gupta whose subsequent plays addressed different topics, including but exclusively Muslim or Asian topics. Whereas it is safe to conclude that for writers, as individuals, to break the mould of 'Muslim playwright', or 'Asian playwright', it is probably necessary for British Asian companies to maintain their identities so that those who want to make theatre about minorities do not condemn themselves to the availability of the un-ticked boxes in theatre venues. This, however, is not a solution for a number of reasons. First, there is a severe shortage of theatre houses dedicated to minority theatres. Secondly, producing Muslim feminist plays in association with big theatres helps them reach a wider audience than the audience of Tamasha, Tara, and Kali. The bottom line is, the diversity boxes of theatre venues, and the South-Asian theatre companies are necessary and helpful for emerging theatre genres, but there needs to be a genuine drive to develop and support new writings in general, especially those addressing issues in minority communities, and more specifically in addressing topics as contentious and as misrepresented as Muslim women. Without such a genuine drive that

[64] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wZ322ZXWSWM
[65] ibid

looks at this theatre as a project that needs development, research and outreach, the theatrical attempts within this genre will find it difficult to go past their current fringe and niche status.

This thesis and the plays I study in it are a perfect example of why my iteration of Islamic Feminisms is important. The themes, the different representations of Muslim women, and the discussions and depictions of issues that are important to Muslim women in general, in the UK in particular, and also my own analysis of all these elements of the plays are all clearly creative/research/analytical activities that highlight real problems of Muslim women that need analysis and treatment. These feminist activities have been done by Muslims and non-Muslims alike, women and men (myself and Ayub Khan-Din), and they utilised religious narratives as well as secular ones. For example, Stephanie Street, who is not a Muslim, represented British Muslim women in a way that enables audience members to live moments of the experience of Muslim women from their personal and intimate perspective on things that are usually thought about from ideological and political perspectives. In my interview with Alia Bano she told me that for her next theatrical project on Muslim women she intends to write about the influential women in Islamic history, be they queens, warriors, Sufis and thinkers, or activists. This project, on which she is working at the time of writing this thesis, utilizes elements of Islamic history that are placed firmly within the conservative Islamic tradition in order to argue for Muslim women's rights and agency in the 21st century in the UK. This would be a big shift from Bano's clear secular discourse in both Shades and Hens, but to serve the same purpose, according to Bano.

The main two characteristics of Islamic Feminisms are: openness to contributions from different groups and types of feminists, and the focus on the cultural/political/regional specificities surrounding any feminist issue being studied, and abandoning generic, idealistic, and judgmental preconceptions of what is right and what is wrong for a Muslim woman. This research has been an attempt to use these principles when analysing the plays I watched/read on Muslim women in the UK.

Appendix 1. Interview with Alia Bano

A lightly edited transcript of an Interview with playwright Alia Bano on 9/3/2012 in a coffee shop at the St. Pancras station in London.

Alia Bano is a British playwright based in London. Her first play, Shades, was commissioned by the Royal Court and was put on the Theatre Upstairs as part of the Young Writers Festival in 2009. Alia won the Charles Wintour Award in 2009 for Most Promising Playwright at the Evening Standard Awards for. She went on to write many plays, including another Muslim feminist play, *Hens*, which was commission by Sky Arts channel and produced in 2010.
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Okay, so, Alia Bano, I have to ask you if you give me permission for publishing whatever you tell me today in my research and, hopefully, in articles or publications?

Yeah, that's fine. Is that enough?

Yeah, that's enough. So, first of all, before we talk actually about* Shades*, I want to know about what was before it.

Okay. I don't know what you mean, but…

I mean, what led you to do that? The thing is, obviously, you're not just writing because you want to write… not obviously. This is what I've made out of it. You have some issues you want to tackle, you have some, like, causes you are...

Maybe, I don't know if I have causes I want to tackle. I genuinely, I like writing. But I realise I tend to write about things that annoy me, or that I have a question about, if that makes sense. So if I don't know the answer, I'll try and write a play to see if somebody'll give me the answer, and nobody does usually, or if I can work out the answer, at least in my *own* opinion so I can work out the answer, what *I* think by the end of the play. That might not happen. And, I think, yeah, more and more, as I write more, it is becoming about issues, not issues that I want to tackle but like, yeah, things that I'm annoyed with and thinking, why aren't we talking about this.

So basically, originally, you wanted to be a writer, you wanted to start playing, you loved theatre, basically…

I don't know if I loved *theatre*. I loved writing from an early age…

I mean, theatre is what brought you to write about Islamic feminist issues or Islamic feminist issues are what drove you to write theatre?

Oh, I think it's a bit of both. I don't think I ever thought I'm going to write about, I never thought I would write about Islamic feminist issues. I don't know if I, I don't think I thought I was writing that, not in *Shades*, anyway. In *Hens*, yes, but not in *Shades*. I think I wrote *Shades* more as um, because I was annoyed with the media in this country because I thought they were misrepresenting, well, they were only representing a minority of Muslims. And I was tired of having dialogues with individuals in the country that were asking me what I thought were silly questions. I thought if you're a human being and I'm a human being you don't need to ask me this question just because I happen to be Muslim, and I thought the media had done a lot of damage with the Muslim community. And then, when I joined the Royal Court and they did a writing course, it was a Muslim writing course so I knew they wanted to explore…

It was specifically a Muslim writing course?

Yes, it was called 'Unheard Voices', everybody who was invited onto there had to be Muslim of some sort, not like practicing, but, you know, they had to identify…

Write about it?

Well, they were told, we were told we could write about anything, but if you're invited onto a Muslim writing course, you presume, despite what they say, that they want you to write about something Muslim. And that's the first time I actually thought about writing something Muslim, or Asian, or whatever. And then I thought to myself, I watched a lot of Asian plays. What *don't* I want to write? And then I knew I didn't want to write, because there's a lot of things about Asian theatre that I don't like in Britain as well, and then I decided to write a play that I thought was, 2000? Like, on *my* time, and how we hadn't moved forward in the… Because a lot of the plays, and I don't mean this in a demeaning way to Asian theatre, are

about women who have run away from home, abusive husbands, and those kinds of plays that went on for ages and ages and that's a dialogue that's established in British theatre…

I don't think they're portrayed as independent beings who actually are a force to be dealt with or who have a mind of their own or who are funny on a normal level, you know, who are funny, or any of these things. And this is what I mean, why I try to stay away from British theatre because they're always trying to fight oppression in British theatre, or they're always trying to, or they're not funny, or they're weighed down by life, and I think, yes, that's true, but I don't think people go around being heavy-hearted on a day-to-day basis. Because then you wouldn't live, you know, you wouldn't live. And I think, that's what I tried to do with *Shades*. I just tried to show, like, on a daily basis, we're, you know, we're human beings. And there are these issues, but, you know, we don't carry them with us every second.

Speaking about Muslim women, and feminism, or something, if we can say, Islamic feminism, I guess I'll call it so, how do you find it going on now? I've noticed in my research, that there's more and more plays about Muslim women or about women from a Muslim background, and I don't want to be judgemental here, but I…

Do.

…The things is that, I feel that there is, in Britain now, two very, very opposing, very departing ways of Islamic feminism. One that is represented in, like, what you and Atiha and Stephanie and others are doing, which is actually showing how individuals think, not Muslims, they are individuals who happen to be Muslims, you know, and they have their own, let's say, special conditions, let's say…

Their code of conduct, maybe, yeah?

…and certain rules that they have to either live with or adhere to or live with or just it would influence their life in some way or another, but the beginning, the first step is that we are establishing that they are individuals. On the other hand, there is the Islamic, the Muslim societies in universities basic…specifically. This is something completely to the other direction. And you have touched upon that in your play…

Yeah, vaguely…

…when they went to that talk, and the fundamentalist elder, sister, and, also… She wasn't meant to be that fundamentalist, but yeah… but she was

…So, again, here we have the two kinds, the two groups of Muslim women in Britain. How do you find this going on in, I mean, how close to life do you think it is? And how do you look at it? How do you look at the two very, very departing voices of Muslim women? Can I, I think, you're saying there's two. I'd say there's three. I'd say there's that kind of extreme element. The majority are in the middle—and I mean that with the sisters who wear head scarf and those who don't—and then there's the people on the other end, who are very liberal and they're like, 'No, I'm spiritual, in Islam, I've been spiritual and I don't adhere to that and I don't adhere to the other side; I think it's somewhere in between.' And I think there's a large group of people who are in between that. I do think in particular, universities and the organisations who represent Muslims tend to err on the more conservative side.

We were talking about the different voices of Muslim women in the UK…

Yeah, and I think what gets heard most in the UK is those two voices that you mentioned which is the kind of extreme conserv...I don't want to say fundamentalist because I think that's the wrong word, but extremely conservative or literal view of Islam, versus the very liberal vers... more liberal view. I don't think people in the middle or normal people get heard. And I also think neither of those views represent normal people, and that's what I'm more interested in. I'm not interested in, you know, Islam says this and Islam says that, because you can live with any society and have any doctrine that says whatever it likes, but how people interpret it on the ground for me is more interesting than what the scholars are saying or what the academics are saying because they could be perfectly correct in their interpretation but if that's not happening on the ground, then it doesn't matter, to me. Um, yeah, I don't know if that makes, yeah. I think that's what I was trying to do. I don't think I was trying to represent any of the voices. And if you ask me how does it work, I don't think those groups generally mix. I know I don't mix with kind of very conservative view, I stay away from them more because of the judgemental elements that come from them. And in a way, I think I was writing *Shades* to say we need to all start speaking to each other, before we, cause then we can have a more reflective discourse, and probably a more, um, promising's the wrong word, but a discourse that would matter more, because everybody's involved. So I think, within the

Muslim community we need to stop judging each other and accept that these differences exist and then start having a dialogue on, about issues that are not superficial, and I think, at the moment, the issues that we're having in the Muslim community are focused on very superficial things, like, what a woman wears, a headscarf or not, you know, how much do you drink, and I mean, I'm not saying these aren't things that you should do, you should do or shouldn't do as a Muslim. What I'm saying is for me, that's the minor issues, why aren't we discussing the more important issues, and then later, we can get to…

…the details…

…these. I think we're doing it inside out. But that's my problem with Islam in Britain at the moment, and I think it's a very kind of rural, village mentality, where people who have come over, and I include my family in this, are not necessarily educated to a great degree, and so they have held on to traditions, and cultural traditions possibly more, and they value those more than actually the core tenets of Islam.

Is there any kind, do you think there is any kind of hope that maybe, within the Muslim communities, people should or could talk to each other more? I mean, did you think of, like, touring with your play, or...

Yes, but I don't have, um, I don't have control...I don't know how you...I mean, I'm very new to the theatre world, so I don't really have control of how to tour the play, and, um, with *Shades* it was very difficult because it won awards, so other theatres didn't really want to, okay, this is the other problem with England, and it has nothing to do with being Muslim. There is still, and I don't want to say this, so maybe you should think before...maybe you just don't publish this bit and the rest you can...is um, it's almost like, we've done our one Asian play. Does that make sense, so they don't like to...there's a quota, and once you've done your quota of Asian plays, you're not going to do, so, if to tour it, I would either have to do indepedently, and I don't know how. And when I approach other theatres, they were like, yeah, but we've put on an Asian play already. Does that make any sense? So they're not going to put on another one. So it's quite difficult, and, um…

You need funding to do that.

Yes, and I'm not that aware of all those things, and I'm just learning about those because I have a day job as well, and to do two things at once is, I mean, writing a play and my day job is enough for me at the moment.

And I've just learned from Stephanie how expensive it would be to, uh…

Is it? She probably knows. I don't know. I was protected from all of that by the Royal Court. So, um, yes, and I think also, um, I do think England is very much like that, like they all tick their box, and then that's, then they've done their bit. I would love *Shades* to tour. I always, I wanted it to go to Birmingham, where I'm from, cause in a way I thought it would do more in Birmingham then it would in the Royal Court where everybody's middle class and white, and, you know, nice. And they love the play, but I thought it would do more in Birmingham because that's where, you know, that's where I'm from, and that's… The kind of people who'd come and see in Birmingham is very different to the kind of people who would see it in, well even if I went to Trappord in London, the play is very different. I think the audience would be very, yeah, and then I think people might hate you or like it, but then they could have, that debate, and I think that's what needs to be started, is having that debate, and I do think, I do think you're right. The two sides are talking amongst themselves and they need to come together, and I think they need to, this is what I mean by… The point of *Shades* was for us to say, okay, we have our differences, but we need to sit down, and we need to come to a compromise, if that makes sense, or a way of talking to each other…

…understanding

…yeah, and then we can sort ourself, because I don't think Islam is just about making it literal for everyone cause that's not going to work and it's not about making it liberal for everyone cause that's not going to work. I think we have to get to a place where we're accepting differences and we're realising, like I said, that maybe things that people are doing, they're minor in comparison to like… We should possibly be endorsing different principles and that might make people come together more than just this kind of weird, easy things to attach onto. I think it's very easy to say to someone, you know, don't drink. even this Islamic, If you drink, you're really bad, because that's tangible, whereas to say things like, you know, be a respectable, moral person, that's not, how do you measure that, and I think the way we

measure it at the moment is wrong, we measure it in the clothing and the drinking, and all of these things, and I think if we got that right, everything else might just follow.

I like that, you remind me of that sentence in your play. I opened the chapter with it in my, it's a draft, it's not final, but when she says, Sabrina says, 'How do you measure how much of a Muslim you are?' I never could answer this question. It's impossible to answer this question.

It is, and that's my everyday experience. So when you meet someone who's English they ask you, I think from a different perspective, they ask you, how religious are you, because they're trying to gauge how much of a fundamentalist you are. And you're like, mmm, and then when a Muslim person asks you, they're asking from a different perspective, and it's just like, you know what, I can't tell you because my religiousness differs on different days. Some days I'm more religious; some days I'm probably not religious. But to ask me that question is not really, it's not really your question to ask, if I'm honest. It's the question of God, if you believe in God, and I leave it to him. All I know is I believe in God, and I think I follow his more better tenets than other ones.

How was the reception of* Shades*?

It was fine. I mean, like I said, I mean, like, I knew it was going to be fine because of the audience that theatre would attract. So I wasn't worried about the reception. And actually saying that, a lot of my friends came to watch it who are not, who are Asian and Muslim, and possibly don't have the same views as me, and I think they were fine with it. I think, some girls came from Manchester and it was really nice cause afterwards they came up to me and said, 'Oh, we're really glad we watched this play cause this reflects our life more, and we've never seen that on stage, and we do all those things like go clubbing and try to balance', and I thought, that was nice, cause other people were saying it. And then I had the boys saying stuff like, which I thought was weird, 'People like Ali don't exist, like there's no such Muslim like him who's two-faced', and I'm like, don't know which boy, and these are kind of the holier boys, and I was like, I don't know which boys you hang around with but, a) they wouldn't do that to you because you're a man, and b) as a woman, I probably have a different experience of men, Muslim men.

Was there anything that struck you as, like, did you feel any kind of denial of reality... from...

Let me ask you this way. Did you kind of investigate it or look into the reception that the audience had...

No, I didn't look into it. I didn't look into it. I just, if people came up to me afterwards and told me, then I would, so I, I'm sure I'm not the best judge of what the audience thought because I don't know what they thought.

And how was the variety of the audience there?

I think it was, I'll say 60-40, 40 Asian and 60 White, which is probably a different audience or others probably different because a bit like, you put an Asian play on there is sort of a group of people, not necessarily my friends, who will go and see the Asian plays that are on and that are being shown. And I think this probably attracted slightly more Asian people because I know a lot of people who don't usually go to theatre so when they know my play was on they went and if they liked it, then they went again, they told other people who possibly wouldn't go to theatre to go and watch it, if that makes any sense.

I think that's what I tried to do with *Shades*. And if I'm honest, when I wrote my play and I read that review--I'm very thankful for the review, by the way--I was shocked. That's the only review I remember, and that's the only line I remember from the review, which was, 'I never knew Muslim speed-dating existed' And this is my point. This is why I wrote the play, because the media had distorted things so much that people… In a way for me it was sad to write *Shades* because it was a reminder to people that, you know, a bit like Shakespeare said about Shylock, if you prick him, doesn't he bleed. It's like, do you have to remind them again that Muslim people go dating and they eat and they have a joke/job and they get married, and for me that was very sad. I had to go into a theatre and then someone sat there and watched it and thought, 'Oh, they go speed-dating, too', because I presume, the view is that we get forced into marriage, they have arranged marriages, so 'Oh, they have speed-dating, that's quite liberal and Western, I never knew that', and I thought that was… I think there's a lot of pressure on Muslim people to integrate and conform, which is fine, I mean, I agree with that

to a degree, but a section of society has done that already, but there's no pressure from the other side to integrate and I'm not saying conform, but for me integration is a two-way process. So if I can understand quite clearly what happens in white culture, white life, maybe it's easier for me because the media in England is largely about the majority of Britain and we are a minority, but if I can know what goes on in your life, quite simply, and I can understand it, how could it not be vice versa? How can't it be vice versa? How couldn't you just sit down and think, but actually, this is what I mean. I'm a human being, you're a human being, alright, you might dress differently but why couldn't we make those common links, and I think his review, that line did shock me in his review, and I thought, well, this is a good thing then, because I think the majority of the audience will be from his world and they will be...

It means that you did accomplish something.

Yeah, because, I'll give you another example, then. Reza, who in, the character is the Muslim one, you know, the very, kind of conservative Muslim guy, I went out of my way to make him, he's probably a bit sappy because I tried to do this, but I went out of my way to make him a nice character because for me all the Muslim brothers that you ever see on TV are, you know, fundamentalist, are not willing to even entertain the thought of changing their views. They want Sharia law.

On the attack, on the offensive...

Yeah, and when I wrote him, I thought, 'Wouldn't it be nice if I went to a theatre and…'—because it's very easy for Muslim people to like Muslim brothers because they judge them by a different standard—'but wouldn't it be nice if we went to the theatre and the actual normal, average audience would like him.' I think, for me, that was, I think I did achieve it, and I was very happy that I achieved it because I think that made people question how they viewed Muslim men with a beard, or a certain view came through it, and I remember afterwards, people, white people saying to me, 'You know what, we really like that Reza character. We really felt for him, when she didn't go to the museum with him, and we're really glad they got'—well, it's open-ended, but everybody presumed they got together—'we're really glad they got together', and for me that was more of an achievement than, because I knew it would be very easy to like Sam, it would be very easy to like Zain, but would it be easy to like him?

And I'm glad they did like him, because I don't think he went too far away from his religion in the play, but he was still a likeable character. And for me, that is the majority of Muslim brothers, you know, they do try and... they do have a joke, they do have a laugh, and...

Are you watching **Make Bradford British*...***

It's finished now. Yeah, I watched it yesterday. Again, that basically tells, I mean, I knew what was going to happen by the end of it anyway cause...

Is it finished? It's only two episodes?

Yeah, it's all like we're tolerant of each other, and I think that's where a lot of misunderstandings arise because we don't have enough information about who we're living with, and a bit more mixing and it would be fine. And they same for Muslims. A bit more mixing of the two groups, and I think they would become more tolerant of each other. Well, this is what I mean. I think people latch on into society. I'm going to say this now and be very kind of controversial—Islamic societies, and a lot of societies, I don't want to say Islamic societies, but I think the majority of societies for a long time have been patriarchal societies. And they've been patriarchal, heterosexual, kind of male, or that kind of agenda being led. So therefore I think you tend to marginalize and endorse the rules that affect you the least, so oh, how are we going to be good Muslims, oh well, we'll put it all on the women, and then that absolves us of responsibility. And let's raise the issue of homosexual men and make that a big issue because, again, it takes the eyes off us. And I do think there's a bit of that going on. It's like, defer the attention onto someone else and then people won't look at us, and actually, we won't have to be responsible for other actions that are probably worse or equal. and I think that needs to change in the Middle East and everywhere. And I think one path through that is the female voice, that the female voice needs to be heard and I don't think… From my understanding that was the case in the Prophet's time, that the female voice was greatly valued, and it was heard, and somehow over the centuries it's regressed back to what he essentially, in my opinion, fought against, which was equality, you know, trying to get representation for a certain amount of people. I think it's all gone backwards. Whichever period of enlightenment we had, we somehow went back to…

Speaking about the backlash, I thought, when I first read the play, that, I thought that the hard, the most vicious backlash you would face is because of the character of Zain.

It will be, and I think if it goes to the north of the country. I think if it goes to the North...

What about here?

Here, no, because I think in London, people are slightly more open-minded. I know, like I said, some of my religious friends went, and actually what they said afterwards was, 'We now understand how hard it is to be...' and for me, that's like a result as well. If you can understand... They're not saying they agree with it, but they said, 'Okay, we're one step closer to understanding how they feel, and... But like I said again, I mean, I love the Royal Court, but if you want a real reaction, it's not going to happen at the Royal Court, because...

Did you do any post-show talks?

Yes, I did. Yes, and I think somebody asked the question you asked, which was—they ask this after every Asian play—what was the reaction of the community, and I was like, nothing, nothing. I don't think the community were invited to, in any kind of way. And why should they be invited into the Royal Court in that manner. I mean, I think *Shades*, we're hoping *Shades* will be made into a film. So then I might get the backlash, nationwide.

There is such a project now, there is an idea.

The idea's been going around for two years, now we've got a director brought on board, we just need the funding. I'm trying to write the screenplay very slowly, so I'm about twenty pages in. So hopefully, I'm hoping by the end of the year we might get a yes... I mean, again, people don't want to fund it because… The Arts Council are saying it's not, they're saying sort of it's too balanced, if that makes sense, so it's too balanced in the sense that it's not angry at the Muslim, too angry at the Muslim, and it's not too angry at the... and I'm just like, well, I don't want to change it that much to make it...

They want you to do something sexy and tempting and...

And maybe that's *Hens*, cause *Hens* is more that than *Shades* is, but you know, for me, *Shades* is not that. For me, *Shades* is trying to find a balance in the world, and *Hens* is about being more angry, so… I mean, I'll write the screenplay and if it happens, it happens, and if it doesn't, then, I just say it's in the hands of God.

Well, fingers crossed.

Fingers crossed. Then you can interview me and tell me what the backlash is. But I don't think, if I'm honest, this is what I will say about the Muslim community. I don't think they tend to have a backlash against anything unless it's blasphemous…

Not literally…

But even like negatively. I think it's genuinely, if they're misrepresented, if it's something blasphemous, and if it's something anti the Prophet, I think people will then tend to be more vocal and more, you know, more demonstrations. I think, otherwise, they're more tolerant of... They might be annoyed, and they might be angry, and this is not true, and how can you raise this, but I don't call that backlash. I call that opening people's opinions, views, and… I was very conscious in *Shades* not to be blasphemous because a) I be... I'm, yeah, I'm religious or Muslim or whatever, and for me those kind of debates aren't healthy because it takes away from the, it takes away from the issues, and it's too easy for the side who are rising up against it to say, 'Oh look, they said this about the Prophet, oh, look, they said that'. Like, there's a book by Muhammad Knight called, and it's made into a movie, and I really like it, but essentially it's a book about Muslim…

By who, sorry?

Muhammad Knight. Have you heard this? It's a novel. It's about... you should read it cause it's a really good representation of a woman in niqab in it and it's about a like, maybe it's an imaginary world where punk and Islam have come together. So there's rock punkers in America and they're having concerts. And in it, there's a woman in hijab and she does all sorts of kinds of, yeah, devious acts. But there's the one thing in his book that I know that is going to basically… It got made into a movie, nobody watched it cause it wasn't a very good movie, I'll tell you what the book is called when I go home. And in it, basically, one of the characters

pisses on the Quran. And I just thought to myself, 'I know what you're doing but really, that little bit is a) is going to get you notoriety, like everybody in the Western World will speak about it, but you're actually raising some good points that need to be discussed in the Muslim world, and your book's not going to be in that dialogue because you've now done something blasphemous'. Which, obviously, as an artist is alright to do, but I just thought, if you hadn't put that one little bit, people would've defended everything in his book.

So you thought that you want to tone it down a little bit because you want to preserve the discussion and the dialogue.

Yes, and I think I could have been very outrageous and extreme, and I think Zain could have very easily been very, very extreme, for me, cause he was a kind of, but I thought, that's not going to be helpful, and that's going to make people dismiss him as well, because they'll be like, Oh, whatever. But it depends what you want to...

And you were careful in showing Sabrina as openly sexual…

Yeah, but I don't think I will be in the film. I think in the film, I might be, I was thinking about this. I think I was maybe slightly too careful in the play, but I think in the film, I'm thinking, I might make her drink. Well, in the play, she has drunk, but she's given up, but I think I might make her still be drinking. And I haven't quite decided yet whether I give her a past. I might give her a past. I might just give her a past, but that might have to change the relationship between her and Reza.

How do you look at the British Asian companies and British Asian theatres? Do you feel it is integrating more and more and opening both communities on each other more and more, the British Asian and the white British?

I think so. Yes, to some degree, yes, they are doing. I mean, I'm not going to… They do a good job, and I think they have a stable audience that turns up. I am one of them. And I do think this latest play Tamasha's done, by an Asian writer, and it's all about four boys playing snooker, or pool, you know, the critics have come, they liked it, so they'll get a very, a wider audience, and they're at the Bush Theatre so they'll get a very varied audience. And they're touring, so they'll get both audiences. So they're doing well. I think the problem is—and I think

they're actually changing this now, because they've been criticised about it so much they're beginning to pay attention—is that the stories they tend to tell, in my personal opinion, they tend to be old stories. So they will sort of repeat stuff. So, they might tell tales now, or plays now that, in my opinion, were relevant to the majority of Asians in the 80s or in the 90s. They haven't seemed to factor in the fact that things have changed, you know, there are different voices. I mean, I don't think they're very good at representing that, if I'm honest. They're not very good at representing, for me, the modern Asian experience, or the modern Muslim experience. They always, like I said to you, it's a girl running away from home, a girl being oppressed, and, in my personal opinion, I think Muslim women in Britain, there's a portion of them who have become very clever, and they're quite manipulative, and they use, they know how to play the system in both ways. So they know how to get what they want at home, and they know what to get in the kind of Western world. So they will have almost have two cards to play with. So when they go home, they can still be the good Muslim girl, and they will show a certain part to their families and societies, but when they want something in the Western world, they will be the oppressed woman, but that will let them... does that make sense? And in my opinion, these are not women who are oppressed. These are women who are, okay, but in a structure, but they've decided to use that structure to their own advantage. So why aren't we seeing that on stage? Why am I always seeing the girl running away from home, or a dad saying, 'How dare you do this?' And I think, that's the problem with the Asian theatre companies. Although they'll go for a very Oriental kind of theatre, which is not offensive and it is cool to watch. Or a kind of Bollywood kind of theatre which I don't think is appropriate to the British Asian experience. I mean, it's nice to watch, but it's not how we live in Britain. So it's nice as entertainment, but I don't think they push the boundaries. I mean, that's why I'm grateful for the Royal Court because, I think, in a way, I'm not sure whether that play would have gone on an Asian... And it would have taken a long time to be put on in a British theatre company, a Muslim Asian theatre company, because, just because of funding. Cause that's in an early part turning my plays is sure At the Royal Court, I think they were very much more open to... cause they had never seen, and this is my point, you know, I wrote my play—and we've had twenty years of British Asian theatre—why was my play so shocking, or like, so new, does that make sense? You've been around for twenty years. You should have been ahead of a Royal Court on having that kind of play on. So this is my issue with them. It's like,

why weren't you the people to put that play on. I mean, they were with *East Is East*, but that, *East Is East* was years ago.

Yeah, 1970.

Yeah, why aren't you doing that? And, if I'm honest, temreally tend to do better with male writers, though there is a lot of strong women writers coming through. Some of it's because of their funding, so like, you know when they apply to the Arts Council, they say they're going to cover this and this and this issues and raise awareness and I think that does limit what they can put on. And I think my play, like I said, was a very strange play in that it wasn't directly criticising one or the other. It was just showing, if that makes sense, and then how do you put that into your funding agenda? I mean, they're a business at the end of the day. So, I think, for me, I would rather stay in mainstream theatre cause it naturally brings a variety of voices, a variety of audience, and I think that's the way to go.

I want to, maybe, it's up to you if you don't want to answer this question, how much this play represents or is influenced by your own personal life or personal experiences. A lot. When people said to me, is this true, this can't be true, it's a bit like, well, it's true for me. Well, true either for me or for the people I know around me. I think, in a way it was a microcosm of the world that I inhabit, if that makes sense. So I could bring a number of people who I would say to them, no I, this reflects my experience...

So when you are talking about the three types of Muslim women, you are the one that's in the middle, trying to integrate but not to disconnect.

Yes, well, I think I'm slightly on the outside anyway, if I'm quite frank, cause I live in London. I no longer live within my community in Birmingham. I had a strong desire to connect to Muslims and whatever in London, but I think I'm slightly outside of them, too. But it's finding a balance, isn't it. I tell you, I think I'm trying to find the balance.

How hard is it?

I think it's easier without a community behind you, because you don't have the pressures of the community, if that makes sense. But then I think you're creating your own community, which can be hard, if that makes any sense.

Yeah, they do, but that's living in a community, isn't it. I think that's not necessarily... at your level it's governmental, but on our level you live within a community, you're born into a community, you love your community to a certain degree and that's all I think your childhood is everything, you know, your childhood is integral to what you become. I think it's very hard to leave those links behind. I mean, yes, you can be independent, but independence is not a sweet fruit because you're alone, and I think human beings naturally need to connect.

And maybe the bridge society does assert this loneliness...

Yeah, it does, and I think people even in British society who are low independent and whatever, they are not happy. So I don't think that's the answer, cause you know, I could very much have gone that way. And I still go back home quite a lot. So I don't think that's the answer. And I also don't think independence... I do think there's something in communities about morality and values and support. They have some of that right, if that makes sense. And that's, it's just, for me the ideal would be to have a... for the community to be more flexible. And I think that's the problem with communities. They're not. You know, people, women begin to subjugate women because it's all about status and power, and men do the same where it becomes competitive, and then these rules/walls come round, and it's trying to find a balance where we're in a community and supportive, but we're also open-minded. Now those individuals do exist, but trying to spread that message to everyone. And that's what I mean by who you, who is your leader is very important and who your leaders are are very important or who's giving out that message it's like Islamic societies. All of that is very important, cause that then influences everybody else. And if they're not sending out, I don't want to say the right message, but if they're not speaking from that doctrine, well, uh, then yes I mean, there's only so much I can do to start a debate. But if I'm honest I think it's the duty of the scholars and academics to be having those debates because they have the weight of expertise behind them. I would never claim to have the weight of, you know, Quranic tradition, Quranic law. I don't have any of that. Which is why I think we should look up Amina Wadud, you know who Amina Wadud is?

I read something from her. She wrote an article in a book I read.

So I think she's doing that, and I think Qurana, I mean, I'm not saying I agree with her or disagree with her, but at least she's starting that debate in those circles. In a way, I think it's incumbent on everybody to start those debates on every level, and then eventually...

She's funny. I think she's the one who wrote this very, very funny sentence that patriarchal society, the Muslim way of patriarchal society, is actually against Islam because Islam would preach the one god and patriarchal society would put a god, at least one god in every household. So it's really against the way that...

Yeah, she's good, because she led a prayer in New York, and then she got major backlash against her. I think possibly death threats. And only now, ten years later, and I love Sheikh Hamza Yusuf, I really do, but only now is he writing articles saying that actually women can lead men in prayers in certain circumstances. And she wrote that, you know she inspired that debate. I mean you've got to give her, I mean, I give her a lot of credit.

Sometimes I feel that this research that I chose is very, very, very interesting, and has a lot of potential, but sometimes I hate myself for choosing it because it's a lot of headache, isn't it.

It is, it's a lot of headache.

A lot of negative feelings and a lot of negative stories. Do you sometimes feel this way?
Yeah, I do. I mean, I feel it more since I wrote *Shades*. A bit like, 'You people seem to think that I'm the spokesperson for Musl'-- and I'm not. And I never wanted to be. I never wanted to be the spokesperson for Muslim women, cause then that goes against my own play, if that makes sense, cause that's saying...

Individualism...
...I'm like preaching for everyone. But I'm not. I only wrote the play to say, there's more than... you're hearing, you're talking about these voices, but there's actually these voices. You know, there's more than one voice. There's plurality in any society. For me it's common sense, but I don't understand why it's not common sense for the media or the organizations that are

representing us. And why aren't we having discussions about how to include those people in this debate. Why aren't we sharing their stories. But, yeah, I don't know. I think it's... I don't want to be the spokesperson for Muslim women. It goes... and it's a headache cause once you become a spokesperson for somebody, you get attacked, and I'm not really, you know... And then they say things like, to you, 'Yeah, but have you read this' and 'Do you know this' and, no, I haven't. But I think if you don't... I think, people can come from a place where they haven't read things, but they can see what's right or wrong, or they can see what needs to be changed, and that's not an academic debate. That's just a human debate. I mean, if you just observe and you see, and it's something inherent in us, I think, since the dawn of man. I was going to say pre-religion, and I thought, 'Oh no, better not'. Pre-religion? What am I saying? God's always interested.

We could talk for hours and hours about that point. That's very interesting.

But that's what I think. So I wouldn't want to be the spokesperson. And that's why I say academics and scholars, cause they're the spokes... they're the self-acclaimed spokespeople.

And unfortunately, they're not...

They're not doing their job. Every week you have an article in the papers about these scholars and what they're doing, and this is like why I wrote *Shades*. I thought this is ridiculous. You know, you're focusing on things that are minute.

The next play about it, it's not going to be the next play, but it's a play that I'm working at the moment is going to be set in the era that you just said. That kind of Mogul kind of era, power, and I want it to be a King Lear crossed with a Macbeth. But the main prem--I've had this idea in my head for two years, I just haven't written it. I'm very slow--is that I want it to be about a king, a Muslim king, who dies. And he controversially leaves, he has a son and daughter, the son is married. He leaves the throne to his daughter because he knows she's going to be the better leader. But then what happens is in that kind of room when he dies is the kind of scholar who then really thinks women shouldn't be leading. Cause you know there's that quote by Prophet, god this quote that's been misinterpreted, something about, 'If women lead a nation, then it will go into decline.'

You have to read Fatima Mernissi. Have you heard of her?

No.

I'll write it for you. You have to read her. She researches that hadith in particular.

And apparently it's false *** in particular, and it's not true, and it was about one queen in particular, and not all Muslim women. But anyway, so he has that mentality. And what he does is he hides the, I haven't worked out the whole play, but he hides the... what do you call it, the king's wishes. And what happens is the son comes on the throne with his wife. And his wife and him are both kind of despotic. They change the way society is, so they ban the writers, they ban the… It becomes a very religious society. And then what happens is... and that's influenced by outside forces, meant to be the West, who then engineer that to happen for them, because they think they can get more out of the brother than they can out of the woman. And then my essence of the play is that the woman has to basically fight her own brother for the throne. Which she does, because one of the white guys has a conscience, and they sort of have some sort of a romance. In essence, she begins an uprising, and she has a duel with her brother. Cause the reveal in the play is that her husband, her husband? Her father had raised her equally to the son, so she knows how to fight. She's prepared for battle, but she just never uses it, because she thought her father's wishes were... and then when she finds out, and then when she sees how the people are treated, she essentially kills her brother in the duel and becomes queen of the land. And then her final decision is to choose between love or leadership. And she chooses leadership. And the reason I want to write that play is because I think, I'm hoping it's a feminist play. Like, you know, you said, 'Is *Shades* a feminist play?' And I would say, when I wrote it, it wasn't consciously a feminist play. But if I write this one about the Moguls, I want it to be a very consciously pro-female, feminist play, as I said, why aren't women leading? I mean, they have done, don't get me wrong. Benazir Bhutto was the prime minister of Pakistan. I know that, people tell me this. But in a sense, it's not a general consensus for men to say women can lead. But why can't they lead? And that's what I want to write. And I also want to show the royal women subjugating other women. Cause I don't think it's... I think it's very easy to say it's men, but I think women are partly to blame for their condition in the Muslim world, whatever you want to call it, the Asian world, the Muslim world, because they could easily say no.

You know, if you write this after a year from now, I will be mad at you because it would be too late to include it in the research. So either write it...

I'm writing it at the moment. I'm doing a lot of reading about Mogul, kind of, I have to make it real. I mean, a lot of it is not going to be real, obviously, but I want to ground it in, like, I want to ground it, I mean, I had the idea when I was doing at the National Theatre, so I want to give it to them first. And I want them to say yes. So I've got to make it sort of, like, a big play, and entertaining, but I want to get that message across, you know, women should be…

You have two options. Either before one year is passed or after three years.

Well, after three years is probably easier, but, you can do, if it come out after three years…

So I can't say, 'Oh, damn! It's... It's published, and I can't include it... '

Well, yeah, if it goes to the National, it will be published, but if the National say no to it, I don't know who's going to say, I don't know who else would say yes to it.

I'm going to send you a number of, titles of number of books that I read on the same issue of Muslim women in...

Well, I've heard about loads of Muslim women who have gone into... like there's a story about one who went into battle at the time of the Prophet, and she hid her face...

Yeah, Khansa'

I can't remember her name, cause I'm really bad at remembering names, so I want to base this female character on her. I don't know if people are going to come back to me and say, 'This woman is totally unrealistic, da-da-da-da' and then I want to say, 'Well, actually, that part came from this woman in Islam, that part came from this woman in Islam, that part came from this woman in Islam. Actually, why aren't we having that debate about these women.'

What Fatima Mernissi does is that she shows the context of each and every verse in the Quran about women, and shows how this verse came in response to this woman's objection on certain things.

Yeah, I would love to read that.

So, I'm sure you will like it.

But that's what I mean,... I think, for me *Shades* is probably inspired by more kind of actually, 'I want to have a debate about this', but that wasn't conscious when I was writing it. It was more like, 'I'm pissed off, and I want to show you. I'm pissed off with you Asian, so I'm not going to show you, like, this is, well, for me, the everyday Muslim.'

Let's go back to the actual play,* Shades*. How, what happened between the first time you wrote it and when it was produced. You told me that there was a change between...

Yeah, I can't remember, but there was a change.

...I think that the text that was published...

...yes, is slightly different to...

is different from the performance.

Yeah, only slightly, about 25% different, so there's... I just mainly cut lines from it, and I think I tried to make Reza more reasonable. And in the play, weirdly, cause you said it, I think the sister was less of a... she was still very religious but I wouldn't have called her... I tried to make her more likeable. Does that make any sense? So I tried to make the audience, and this is what Chetna raised, the actress raised it in rehearsal. She said, 'I feel like she's a bit of a 1-D character.' And so we tried to make her a bit more human. So in the sense that her motivations weren't only coming from religion. They were also coming from concern for her brother. And I think when I, when it was staged, it was more from that aspect that it came, you know, like, 'I love you.' Like any sister would. I might be religious, and these are the religious concerns, but also these are my concerns as a sister who loves you. And I think that was... I preferred that...

How did it come to be staged? I know the idea, the story about how Royal Court did this kind of initiative for new writers, and then decided to produce it, but I mean, did you have

anything to do with the actual production? Did you have a say in... did you go to the rehearsals, for example...

Yeah, of course...

...did you talk with the director

The Royal Court are very good. So, they believe, unlike a lot of other places, that the writer is at the heart of the play. So every decision the director would make, she would say to me, 'Do you agree?' I mean, I wasn't very good at that point. But, well, like, say, the set. So she thought up the idea for the set, and then she said to me, 'Do you agree, cause obviously, we can't, I can't make this the set if you don't agree.' And then, I was like, 'Yes.'

But did anyone else interfere in the editing and the modification...

No, so the director would be like, 'Can you cut this?' And if I said no, she wouldn't. But if she gave me a good reason as to why, then I would agree. But like, there was one thing I think she wanted me to cut in the play. Usually I'm very, I can compromise very easily. It doesn't bother me to cut things. It bothers me... But she wanted me to change something, and I said, 'No, you can't change'--I can't remember what it was now--I said, 'No, you can't change it.' And she goes, 'No, but it's not going to make sense to the white audience.' And I said, 'I don't care if it doesn't make sense to the white audience. It's going to make sense to the Asian audience.' And I said to her, 'I've been very reasonable about you cutting things, but this you can't cut.' Because, at the end of the day, my name is on the play. And if they're going to say, 'I don't like this play,' it's better they don't like the play in the version that I've put out on stage then in the version that you've put on stage.

Can you remember which part was that?

It's so long ago. I should have brought the play in front of me. Maybe to do with the... no, it wasn't the Istikhara. I'm trying to think. It was something Asian. I don't know. I know she told me I had to put more in about the Istikhara, because, so I had to explain that more for the white audience. So what did they want to cut for, like, the Asian audience? Oh, I can't remember. But it's that kind of... I think, when you go in as a writer, you have to decide what

you're not going to cut. You have to know that they're going to want to get rid of something and change some things, so you have to go in knowing, 'I'm not changing that.'

Appendix 2. Interview with Stephanie Street

A lightly edited transcript of an Interview with Stephanie Street on 9/3/2012 in a coffee shop at the St. Pancras station in London.

Stephanie Street is an actor who played the lead character in a number of the plays I am studying in this thesis, including Nosheen in *Sweet Cider*, and Sabrina in *Shades*, before she wrote her first play, *Sisters*, which is a verbatim play that came about after Street interviewed over 40 Muslim women in a number of cities in the UK about what it means to be a Muslim woman. *Sisters* was put on Sheffield Theatres in 2010. Street went on the write a number of plays, short films, and carried on with her acting career in theatre and television.

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So, first of all, I want to ask you, Ms. Stephanie Street, if you give me permission to use whatever you tell me today in my PhD and publish it…

I absolutely give you permission to use anything I say.

Ok. Thank you very much. So, before we start talking about* Sisters*… Before we start talking about the actual play, about* Sisters*, I'm interested in knowing what was before that, years and years.?

That's a very good question.

Very clearly,* Sisters *is a project. It's not only a play, because, obviously, you have looked very hard to come up with this collection of women. Obviously, you didn't do that because you wanted to do a play, full stop. It is some kind of social project…

Well, actually, no, in a way, I did want to do a play. I wanted precisely that material, that work, to result in a piece of theatre. And that is, in the abstract, because I believe that theatre has a power for, sort of, social and ideological change in a way that no other artistic medium has. And I say that as somebody who has worked in theatre for, now, nearly eleven years, professionally. But, you know, I've always been very much, I've always been, it's always been a love of mine. I didn't grow up in a theatrical family, but it's always been something that I did and I enjoyed. And as I came to do it as I got older—and I studied English as well—I came to realise that what you get in the theatre, the exchange between the play and the players and the audience, is a really vital and visceral exchange. And that transference of ideas, for me, is the reason why I act in theatre and then, now, increasingly am writing it. So, I was acting in a play called *The Laramie Project*, which is an American play written about the murder of a young, gay man in small-town America, in a town called Laramie. On the outside, it's a play about homophobia, but in truth, it's a play about community. It's a play about how an event like that, a really, really brutal killing, a hate killing, can make a society examine itself. And it was written by a New York-based theatre company, so, very liberal theatre company, who went to interview all the inhabitants and the people involved in the case over the course of the year when the trial took place of the murderers. And what it ends up as, this piece of

theatre, is this really beautiful portrait of a community, sort of grieving and examining themselves and analysing themselves. But also, through that, a really clever examination of politics and ideology. And when I was acting in that, and it occurred to me that this play was written by actors and directors, I thought, 'I could write a play.' I don't mean that arrogantly, but I thought, you know, this process fascinates me. And the reality of being an actor, especially an actor of an ethnic minority in the UK, is, things are a lot better now, but is that work is intermittent. So, having been, I suppose a little bit like you, in the sense of having been somebody who was from an academic background, I'm used to working hard, and I like it. So it really frustrated me, that sense of not working. And I just, I was talking to a friend, and I had this idea about wanting to interview some people for a play based on real lives, and over the course of this conversation, it's a brilliant theatre director, we decided that this would be the thing for me to do because, as a woman of ethnic minority, I might be able to access women to talk to me more readily. And when we were doing the *Laramie Project*, the bombs in London happened. You know, the July the 7th, 2005, bombs. We were playing in the West End when that happened. And we had to cancel definitely the show that night and I think the show the next night because all of, the whole transport system went into meltdown. Nobody went anywhere. And I was really angry about that. I was really angry that the actions of people terrorising a liberal society, whatever the reasons they, I didn't care why they were doing it, but the actions of them interrupting sort of free dialogue, yeah, life, but also an exchange of ideas in a liberal society, really angered me. And we were like, 'Fuck it. Let's walk into the theatre.' And I live in South London. But everyone was pre--all the actors were prepared to walk in. But we would have had no audience, so in the end, you know, we didn't play for two nights. Of course, then the knock-on effect was this dialogue that opened up in the public in the media about who British Muslims are. What they represent. And that really, that made me just as angry probably if not more angry because I grew up in Southeast Asia. I grew up in Singapore.

You grew up in Singapore?

Yeah, my father's English. My mum's Indian Catholic. My family is nominally, well, no, my mother's very religious, but we are Catholic. We are a Catholic family, but in Singapore, you live hand in glove with everybody of every faith. We all celebrate, it's just the way it is in a polytheistic society, a polyreligious society. You celebrate all the different, you know, I've celebrated Eid for as long as I can remember. So It really made me angry that people who don't know were talking on such a level of stereotype. So that kind of galvanised me to interview women because you know, the women who were speaking out, the Muslim women who were speaking out were really only ever speaking out about hijab or about…

…terrorism

…cultural oppression and about, yeah, terrorism. Yeah, exactly. And I thought, there's just so much more to their lives. But also so much more to the debate than this. And also, there are many more types of women, I'm sure, than what we're getting represented on ghastly, no, I love Question Time, but you know, on things like Question Time, where the public debate all happens. So I started by, I thought, 'What's easiest?' I think I was, I probably would have been 26, 25, 26 at the time. So not long out of university. So I got in touch with Islamic societies at universities, cause I thought young women would be probably, in a way, more prepared to talk. And I met the then-president of the Islamic society at Imperial, and we did this. I mean,

we went out and had, actually, we went out and had pancakes, but I sat there with my tape recorder. And when I transcribed it, I just knew I was onto something. Because the complexity of her views and her life, it was just breathtakingly fascinating. It was just gripping.

Is she in the play?

Yeah. She's the, in the group of young girls, I can't remember what I called, cause I had to change it, I know her real name, do you have it with you?

Ah, yeah, you didn't use the real names.

I didn't use their real names. That was the promise. So, they all agreed to speak to me—this was a very important thing, actually—they all agreed to speak to me. Cause, obviously, there was a big cultural… part of the reason I wanted to do this is cause so many of these women wouldn't speak out publicly. So I said, 'What I will do is I will guarantee I will change all identifying details.' So I changed where people come from and what they're called. But she is…

I would guess Aysha.

Yeah.

This is interesting, cause this would lead me to something else I will talk about, but not yet. So this is about how you decided to write this play. But in the beginning, when you decided to become an actor, an actress, was there any kind of social issue behind… you wanted to tackle behind it, or no?

No. Not really. I mean, I, like you, I studied English literature at university, and I did it really thinking I was going to be a lawyer, cause that's, you know, it's just sort of standard. And then, I did a lot of acting at university. So I became an actor because it inspired me, more than anything else I suppose, workwise. But, what that was… you know, I've never wanted to be famous, I've never wanted any of those things. But the idea of… I don't know. It's quite personal, really, but playing out things that you don't get to do in real life. I'm quite… It gives expression to parts of me that I don't necessarily get to all the time. And I generally tend to play women who are a lot angrier and stronger. I mean, I'm quite strong, but, you know, angrier and more emotionally on the surface than I am. It's something I do very easily as an actor and I don't do very well as a person. So that's, I think that's what drew me to it. But I didn't do it because of social change at the time. I've now realised that that's what interests me about it. But also, when I started being an actor, when I was training at LAMDA, and I did three years there, and I was actually very fortunate because, you know, I had to pay fees. My mother, my parents were divorced, but I had to pay fees to study at university. So I thought, I'll just do a year's training to become an actor and see, and they really looked after me, actually. They said, 'If you want to train, you should do it properly. You should do three years.' And they found me a scholarship. They found me the money to train. And they really kind of nurtured me. And when I was there, there was no racial specificity of casting, like, you played everything. You're an actor. So when I… Having said that, the very first part I played when you're shown to the industry, the agents and casting directors, was a playing a British Asian

woman. And I was really confused by that. I didn't quite… and then I realised they were marketing me. Because that is what the business does to you. Now I've been quite fortunate because in the TV work I've done, I've played a lot of parts that aren't specifically Asian women. Not that I have a problem with that, but there's just, there aren't a lot. And you probably know from watching TV here what there is written in television is pretty badly written. So, I've never wanted… I didn't become an actor to be defined by how other people see me. I became an actor to tell stories. So that kind of annoyed me. But, you know, as, now that I look back on it for ten years, I think I've actually been quite fortunate. I have played a quite wide range of parts in terms of casting.

Speaking about trying to market you as British Asian actress, what do you feel about that? How did you feel when you acted in plays about British Asian women, and when you did your play? Did you feel, and, I mean, not yourself, but how did you personally feel about those parts or that play, but how did you feel the perception, how did you feel the theatres, let's say, and producers looked at it, and how did they… Did you feel that, at any level, that some British Asian practitioners expressed frustration with the fact that the main venues are only interested in British Asian or minority theatre in general as a kind of publicity or some sort of lever, or did you feel something like that?

No. I mean, I think I've been, in the work that I have done… Anybody who makes that theatre, so I don't mean the producers, I don't mean the people programming it, but anybody who writes it or directs it of course will do it because they want to challenge stereotypes, because they want to move the debate on. But I think there is an enormous amount of ticking boxes that happens in programming minority work. Because we live in a pluralistic, multicultural society, and the Arts Council dictates, pretty much dictates that a certain level of representation has to exist in work that they fund. So theatres actually have to do it. I am not entirely… well, no, I'm being diplomatic. A lot of them don't do it the right way in my opinion. They do it just to go, 'Yes, we've done a show about an Asian community. We've done that. We've discharged our responsibility for this calendar year.' But they don't always seek the most rigorous ways of looking at these communities. They'll just kind of have a relationship with a theatre that produces black or Asian work, and they will just get them, you know, 'Come and do this play.' It doesn't really matter what the play is as long as there is a play. With *Shades*… I'll talk about the three, three or four, so with *Shades*, the process to find Alia and to develop that play was really, really rigorous. But there are a lot of people within the industry, like writers I know, who are going, 'But is this play only being put on because the writer is a female Muslim?' And the Royal Court set out explicitly to find a Muslim playwright. So they invested a huge… and I commend them for doing it, they invested a huge amount of time and money going out to youth theatre groups and doing outreach work to find that voice that hadn't been heard. And, I suppose if they hadn't found anyone they wouldn't have programmed the play, but, they were explicitly looking for it. And people were sort of going, you know, well, is it, you know, is that play only produced because of those reasons? Now, that isn't the case, because I think what Alia wrote in that was a really new and unheard, it was that. It was an unheard perspective on what that, the female, Asian, religiously Muslim identity could be. And the play that I suggested you have a look at, a play called *Sweet Cider*, by Em Hussain, that was produced by a company called Tamasha, who I don't know if you've come across. So, they, obviously, you know, they have a lot of contacts with writers who are Muslim, and the writer really wanted to represent what happens when women are excluded

from their communities for one reason or another. So it's about these two girls living in a shelter who've run away from home for various reasons. Now, Tamasha are really committed to representation, and the theatre, the Arcola, where that happened, is a theatre that really kind of celebrates diversity and produces work to represent. So that had complete and total integrity, and wasn't being done for the sake of it. It was being done because it was a really new play. She writes quite poet… she's a performance poet, so she writes quite lyrically, so her voice and the subject matter was, I think, very fresh. *Sisters* was programmed because, well, I hope it's a good piece of work, and I hope it was the right… but equally, the Arts Council in Sheffield, they are under an obligation to serve their community. And they have a really significant Asian community in Sheffield. It's mixed Hindu and Muslim, actually, but they are completely… historically, they don't have any interface between the theatre and the communities there. So when Daniel Evans, who's the artistic director who runs the, who has so much integrity, who's a brilliant, brilliant man, he wanted to sort of set his stall out quite early on and say, 'I am committed to engaging with the community.' So *Sisters* was the first play that was produced in the studio space when the Crucible reopened in 2010. So it was a statement of intent, really, from him. And I think what he-—just, sorry, just quickly—but I think what appealed to him about it was the sort of plurality of voices, you know that, it didn't, I say, it's a play that sits on the fence in as much as, you know, the whole point of it was not to take a standpoint but to say, 'You can't really put this in a box.'

There is an argument to be made here, that, well, doing plays specifically to represent the British Asian community is, on one hand, something that will guarantee that we will see more and more plays, but there is an argument—I'm not saying that this is what I think—but some practitioners would say that maybe this would limit this kind of theatre, so to speak, that this will not, this will mean that the big venues like the mainstream, how can I say, the biggest names, like Royal Court, Lyceum, you know, will not see as many British Asian plays because there are specific theatres and specific companies that will be in certain places that, if you want to see a British Asian play, you go there.

I don't think that's how it works, honestly. Because the way the Arts Council in Britain functions, they're a central, they're a national body, but each region funds work within a region. So there's an Arts Council for the Southwest, there's an Arts Council for London, there's an Arts Council for the East, and each region does have to take on the mantle of diversity. Now it isn't necessarily British Asian, because if, you know, there aren't that many British Asians within the community, maybe that isn't such a priority as, say, I don't know, Eastern European, you know, theatre about the wave of migration that's come from Eastern Europe. There are, you know, I would say now that the Asian community's fairly widespread, so I would imagine most regions ought to have an obligation to do that. But I'm sure, as you know, the big… See, the way it works, there's like commercial theatres and there's subsidised theatres. Now, commercial theatres really are just there to make money. They have no obligation to any funding body. So the, I can't think what it's called in Exeter, the big commercial theatre, receiving house, I don't know, but pretty much every big town will have one. They're just going to take touring musicals, touring shows, but, you know, nothing… They don't, that's not important to them. Whereas, I would say, within subsidised theatre, if it's subsidised by the Arts Council, once a year, they probably have to go, 'Have we done a play…' not always, but you know, I doubt the Northcott Theatre in Exeter probably ever worry about it. I doubt they do. I doubt… let's say, the biggest cities, Sheffield, Manchester, Birmingham,

Leicester, maybe the theatres in Scotland. I'm not so sure. Bristol, I doubt they worry about… I think it's more where the communities really ask for it, represent it.

I wasn't really accurate in my question. Forget about the theatres themselves. Let's talk about the practitioners and the companies. For example, Tamasha Theatre, when they would produce something, you will know that this is about British Asian people. So probably, this would mean less and less, let's say, white British would go there because…

To see their work or to work with them?

To see their work. I mean, the message that someone wants to send this way, is it going, by having British Asian companies, specifically, or a writer who only writes on British Asian issues, would it spread more or would it isolate?

Well, interesting. I think Alia is the same as me, right? So having both written our first play, both of us wrote our first play about British Asian communities, neither of us, both of us would really like to not have to write plays about British Asian communities for a little while. So the play that I've got going on in May is about the NHS. I'm quite political, but I don't just want to write about my community. So I think we're both, as you describe, you don't want to be limited in what you write about. I don't mean this to sound ungenerous, but because Tamasha, and there's another company called Tara Arts which was the first big British Asian company, they've been around for a long time, and they've really… They were there when there was very little theatre for minority communities made by minority communities. There were very few practitioners. I don't know if they've necessarily moved on their theatrical dialogue. So not only if you go and see a show by Tamasha do you know that it's going to be a show about British Asians, you have a pretty good idea of what it's going to be. Having said that, I went to go and see their play *Snookers* which is on tour at the moment, which is written by a taxi driver from Middlesborough about British Muslim men. It was more, it was… it was a different kind of production to what I usually expect from them, but the themes were pretty consistent with what they tend to replicate. So they're kind of stuck in one theatrical medium and in one debate. Off the subject of the Muslim women, but it's British Asian women, I played, I was in a play at the National Theatre last summer, which was part of the season of new writing, called *Double Feature*, and in it, I played a British Sri Lankan girl, a cricketer, who is on the eve of her debut playing cricket for England which she was due to play against Sri Lanka. And it was a monologue. It was a one-woman piece, just her practicing her batting and talking. What it became was this meditation on identity. And no one even thinks about British Tamils, British Sri Lankans. It's just not something that's been addressed in theatre, really. And no one really knows about the civil war in Sri Lanka. It's just not been talked about. So it was totally new territory. But her as a woman, I just loved it, because she was this really boyish, no, I mean, she was like a butch, she was a sportswoman, you know, angry, really foul mouthed, but so political, and in a sense, her identity was so honest and truthful. And it was programmed, not because they wanted an Asian writer to be in that but because Nick Hytner, the artistic director, said he'd never, that play touched on things he'd never heard about, so it needed to be done. So what we need is for the main houses to be doing that. The big, like you say, the big repertory theatres to be doing exactly that, but also for those characters not just to be appearing in plays on their own, or in plays with other people of their own community, but to be functioning within new writing as a whole. So when there is a female

character, a lead female character that is written, the thing I care most passionately about is that she can look like me without having to have cultural issues. That she can be a Muslim without having to be in line for an arranged marriage or community exclusion. That those people function as much as I do in society or Alia does.

I went to a talk, I can't for the life of me, you know, this was like 2004, 2005, so forgive me, but I can't remember what the talk was about, but I definitely remember feeling like I shouldn't really be there. I didn't fight them, no. At the time, I was, I needed that interview, so I was having to be quite solicitous really. It worried me enormously, these little kind of hotbeds that don't integrate with the rest of the university, that talk about being viewed as outsiders when they don't in any way try and function…

And want to tell the world that everything is rosy and beautiful. There's no problem. Did you feel that, did this make you, does this have any part of doing* Sisters*?

Absolutely. But you see, what I didn't want to do… I had a lot of problems, I had a lot of problems when *Sisters* was played at Sheffield. And actually, I think you should maybe try and get in touch with the theatre, just to talk about the work that they did to engage the community, cause they've got some really good stories to tell, actually. But I had a lot of problems for being a non-Muslim writing a play about Muslim women. A lot of young Muslim women really took offense at it. One of them came to a post-show talk and tried to take me on… not physically, but…

Something like, 'What do you know?' or something

Yeah, yeah, 'How dare you?' And the thing they were most horrified by was that one of the characters in it was gay, was gay and a believing Muslim, and saying that, 'You made it up. You're lying. You're blaspheming.' When they hadn't even taken the time to figure out how I had written this play which was based on interviews, entirely taken from interviews with real people. So, I didn't make her up. And just the notion that you can't be two, I just find ludicrous, Instead of passing judgement on those characters, what I tried to do is, as faithfully as I could, represent them. So that group of young girls, in a way, for me, were the most worrying personally. I was most worried in, not for myself when I was with them, but for what these women would become when they were older because they were so, apart from, oddly, the one I played, Maissun, they were all so self-perpetuating, you know, they just kind of fuelled their own fire. Whereas with the older women and the family, I think you get past a certain age, and then you start to reflect a little bit more. But also, they'd been through more. They had come here, they'd had to fight. With the girls in the family, you know, they'd seen their mother, they'd seen what their mother had gone through converting to Islam, they'd seen what happened to their brothers. And so my objective, really, as a writer was just to represent what those realities were rather than to pass judgement on them. Because I think, in a way, if you feel the hand of a writer too much, that, for me, isn't… I mean, of course my politics completely influenced that in that, of course, it's loaded, the opinions are loaded much more on the side, I would say, of the liberal women, of the more articulate, politically liberal women.

But you didn't show that. I mean, you didn't show any bias in the play.

Well, I really tried very hard not to. I tried really hard not to, because my objective, when I wrote it, was to be representative rather than to pass judgement on it.

Like, Maissun was singlehandedly fighting on four fronts, I think, so…

Yeah, and interestingly, just before the play was on, I was at the Royal Court, at a kind of evening thing, and I saw this girl, and I really, we got on very well, and I saw her a lot after this, actually. She works in hospital. She's a chaplain, you know, multi-faith chaplain so she goes to see people who are unwell in hospital. I saw this girl I knew, and I realised it was her, but she'd stopped wearing her hijab. And I was like, 'I'm sorry, it took me so long to realise who you were,' and she said, 'Yeah, I knew. A lot of people do that at the moment.' And I didn't ask her directly, but she said, 'I just stopped being able to justify it intellectually. I reached a point where I could no longer justify my decision to wear it, so I had to stop.'

I was going to ask about the follow up, if there was any, with the characters.

Not so much. We did a discussion with experts as well. That's why I think it's worth you getting in touch with the Crucible, actually, because they did amazing work finding these experts. One of them was the real woman… this is ridiculous. I can't remember my own play. Mariam. The real Mariam, who was a scholar, she's a scholar of Islam. I suggested two or three people who I felt would be prepared to identify themselves, basically. I mean, that was the issue, that most of these women spoke to me on the proviso, like I said, of confidentiality. I knew there were two or three who would be willing to go, 'Yeah, I'm totally happy for you to know that that character was me.' And we've stayed in touch a lot. She wants to write a comedy for Channel 4. I mean, she's hilar… she's nearly, in her late 60's, she's got a son who works in the Navy. She wears hijab, but, you know, she… Her husband is a filmmaker from Afghanistan. She's just an incredible woman.

I noticed that, really.

Yeah, I mean, you can just tell. I would go to her house and she'd make tea, and we'd just sit on the floor. And I wouldn't, I stopped asking her things because just the way she talked about her faith, I kind of lost my, I lost all objectivity and my researching instinct when I would listen to her. So we've stayed in touch. Husna, there's been an enormous… I mean, this is personal rather than kind of… but there's been an enormous sort of fallout about her gender identity. It transpired, when we were asking for people to come, I was trying to find out who would come up to Sheffield to do this post-show discussion. I asked her because she loved to talk about being transgender. She really wanted people to know what this gender identity was about and that, for her, the faith was kind of immaterial. It was always going to be there. But, it was about that she had this gender identity that no one understands and no one… She was really punished for it in her community and she really wanted to speak out about it. Then it turns out she had… She was instant messaging me on Gmail or on Facebook, I can't remember, and I'm not very, you know, it's not a way I communicate particularly successfully, but she basically said she didn't want to come because she'd actually lied to me. She had been born, biologically, as a man, but had been systematically sexually abused by an uncle, raped by an uncle as a young girl, so was, when we'd gone… I'd gone with her to a hospital appointment because she wanted some company, and she was looking to have gender reassignment, but

to… but she hadn't been born intersex. She had been born biologically as a man, but she wanted to become a woman as a consequence of the sexual abuse she had suffered. So her story was sort of turned on its head, and she didn't feel she could come and talk publicly, having lied to me.

I'm sorry, I'm a little confused here. In the play, she's born a man…

She tells that she's born, no, she's born transgender.

Oh, she says that she's born with male organs but not complete?

Not complete. So that's technically intersex.

That's a lie?

That's a lie. She was born with completely male physionomy

But psychologically feels that…

Yeah.

And the fact that her, or in this case, his uncle raped him…

Was the catalyst for the gender reassignment. So, because she'd talked so much aboutbeing transgender in this, that was, she was technically talking in fantasy. She wasn't lying. She was talking in fantasy, cause that's what she wanted. She wanted to completely negate the maleness of her.

Oh, interesting. And did she change sex?

I don't know. I tried to contact her a couple of times and… you made me think I should, actually. I'd love to know how she is. But because of her situation, she had to do really extensive psychiatric profiling before they would agree to do her gender reassignment. So, she was in the middle of that when we last spoke. So I've seen the real Maissun. The girls in the family, in a way, they're the ones I'm saddest to have lost touch with. I asked them to come and they didn't. But that family, you know, they're so sort of… there are so many skeletons in the closet. And what had happened with them… All the scenes where they're together are based on an interview I did with them all together in the house, when they were just… I came with a friend to do this interview, and there were just trays and trays of kebabs and pakoras. They just didn't stop feeding us for three hours while we talked. But I got back in touch with the real Samina, and said, 'Thank you so much, and it would be really nice to see you all again at some point.' And she said, 'Will you come back. I would really love to talk to you on my own, without my sisters.' So all this stuff that you then get her on her own was an interview that I did with her alone. She felt she couldn't say all of that with her family around her. So I think because she was a bit of a whistle blower, she then wanted to remove her family from… and they're not originally from Sheffield. They're from Birmingham. They're completely… Because she's been into hiding from her brothers. There's quite a lot of danger around that family. And it's the issue of the brothers drinking, and the father's addiction to

gambling, and the whatever there is really… I had a look at your email again this morning, and it just made me think of that, because I thought, yes, Muslim women are not utilising the social freedom that they have here. But so many women aren't. So many women just generally aren't. I'm working with a group of young people at the moment on a new play that I'm going to write about young people. And there's this young, they're all under 18, they're young outside of education and training, so there's some very, very underprivileged kids in west London. And there's this one girl who is really bright. She's really talented. She's a good little actress. We're doing like a theatre, we're devising a play with them. And, you know, she's hard working. She started a sexual, she started sleeping with one of the boys in the group. She's this sort, you can just see, she's just desperate for male attention. She's not had any family around her all her life, so about a week and a half ago, she and this young lad got started, obviously started a sexual relationship, and she's now stopped attending the group. She's not coming anymore because… and we all went out for dinner the other night… and I'm just using that as an example. I think so many women of any society, really, have the dice loaded against them in the sense of needing male, or feeling like they need male vindication. And the whole of this theatre industry is presided over by men, so it's going to be a decision making on a certain level. And I wonder whether it will happen in our lifetimes, but the change needs to happen from our generation. It needs to happen when our generation is sort of… Because I think our generation is, there are enough women in our generation, or more than there ever have been who are willing to pick a fight. I mean, I want…

It's starting in this generation, actually. It wasn't there at all before.

I don't think, the generation above us, you're right. And I recently got married and I want to have a family and I want to do all of that. And I know it will be really difficult to make all of that happen at the same time. But I think if there is enough des—, one thing we as a generation have been empowered by is by choices and ability to do a lot of things. So, I think our generation is willing to take the fight on, definitely.

Because, at the end of the day, nothing would change by itself. The thing is, that if we keep missing our chances, they will not be there for long.

Well, that's why this play at the National, I was really, really proud of, the one I did last summer, about the cricketer. Because she was just, she was so much tougher than women are allowed, generally represented as being. In this country, you really hold up the figures like Lady Macbeth or women in Ibsen, like Nora in *A Doll's House*, who kind of fight hard against the system, but are still, nonetheless, you know—we're talking about plays written before last century—totally cornered by their system. And I think it's about time that women are allowed, those women are allowed to be liberated from their, those female characters are allowed to be liberated from their system. Or function.

I want to ask you about the pragmatics of how it happened.

How it came about? The production? or…

Yeah. I mean, like, for example, was it your initiative, or were you asked to do it?

I started the writing completely on my own initiative, and that would have been in 2005, so it was five years from beginning to end. And, you know, when you've never written a play before, unless you are on a sort of writer's program or something like that, it's quite difficult. You just have to do what you do as an actor. You have to keep knocking on doors. So I tried quite a lot of theatres. The Arcola Theatre in East London, which is probably worth you having a look at as a venue. It's run by a Turkish couple…

What is it called again?

Arcola. A-R-C-O-L-A. And it's very much rooted in the Turkish community there and in… It's in Hackney so Hackney's very diverse. It's one of the most diverse boroughs of London. They agreed to put it on there, but the fundraising was just, you know… I applied for money from the Arts Council, I think, at the time… Because I'd never written a play before, it's very difficult to just start the ball rolling when you're new. And then eventually, the director who I'd been working with it a bit on was working at the time doing creative development in Sheffield. So she was kind of steering the theatre's involvement with the community. And they were obviously on the lookout for a play that, like I said, would somehow tap into the communities that they weren't accessing at the time. And she suggested the play to the artistic director, Daniel, and he said yes. So that's kind of how it came to be on there. And then I did it… I'd kind of left it for a while. You know, you do tend to lose heart a little bit, or you know, you work so hard on something and then… I don't know if it's the same what it will feel like when you publish your thesis and you're kind of gone, 'What happens to it now?' You know, all that work.

Because what's quite difficult with a play like this, where you don't have a central character, is to construct a narrative arc. And I always knew that the family were going to function as that, but I just wasn't doing it as well as I could. And also, the thing I really wanted to present in it was a sense of what society thinks, and it took me a long way to find the kind of medium, the way to do that most, so it didn't feel like an imposition. So, what were all these women standing in opposition to. Not opposition, but what were, you're trying to look at all these seventeen women. What's the sort of societal expectation, and what are they? So that…

How was the perception? How did it feel, generally speaking, what…

While it was on?

Yeah.

Well, apart from the angry young girls, people really loved it. And what was great is how diverse…

Oh, it was a group of girls attacking you?

Yeah.

Must be an Islamic society of some university.

Or they're just young girls who live in the area. Yeah, yeah, exactly. But, you know… Well, there's something to be said about that in a minute, but what I was so pleased about was how diverse the audiences were culturally, ethnically, and also gender-wise. It wasn't just, it's a play, cause there were no men in it, there were no male characters, and yet it was a really mixed audience. And you had that lovely thing where people said it made them think of their own families, which is exactly what I wanted them to do. You know, it made them think of their own relationships with their own cultures. Not, 'Oh, I think differently about Muslim women,' but how much it made them think about their own lives. Which is sort of what I wanted to achieve. And because it was quite a sort of festival atmosphere, as in, you know, we would hand out pakoras and samosas and sweets and everything, and cups of tea every night, people really loved that. This is the way, like cheaply bribing your audience to like your work. Feed them.

And it also puts them in the atmosphere of, actually, the Asian family.

Exactly. That's why we did it. I sort of hated it as an actor. I never intended to be in the play because I really want… Writing is something I'm very… I want to do more. It was my first play, and I wanted to see how that process was. But the director, the artistic director… I'd been in *Shades* by that point, and I'd been in another play. A really great play about climate change done very well in London. And they were like, 'Well, you have to be in it.' You know when someone insists too much, and then you just can't say no, so I said, 'Well, okay.' And it meant that my eye on it as a writer… it was a really difficult balance to maintain, and I definitely didn't enjoy it as an actor because I was, my writer's head was too worried about it. But what then happened is because the theatre worked so brilliantly to market it, and we did a lot of really effective publicity, and also because the play was good, we sold out, like within two days of opening. So that's a lovely feeling, when you know you're packed and people want to see it. And nearly every night, people stayed to talk to us afterwards…

And why did it… Is it up to you or entirely to the theatre that… Why didn't it tour, or something? Because this is something… I didn't actually tell you at the beginning what I think about it and about you and what you did, but I really think that this is phenomenal. I really think, honestly, because this is something that is shattering all stereotypes, saying that, 'Well, all of you experts, theorists, you know, shut up. This is the real thing. This is what they think. This is how varied it is.' I wrote so far an introduction of the chapter I'm working on now, so the first sentence I wrote is that, 'If one can answer the question of… no, if one can explain or describe the issues of Islamic feminism in one sentence, then this sentence would be "It is impossible to describe the issues of Islamic feminism in one sentence" ' So, yeah, this is not only a play. This is a social study.

Well, it's theatre politics, really, and that probably is worth something not saying. I'll tell you about it when you turn it off, but it's theatre politics, is the reason. Well, ostensibly, but also, it's something I could now do. And I am thinking about coming back to it, because it's not time-sensitive, right? This play didn't… So, now that I have developed a little bit more as a writer, and I've got a bit more work going on, I think I'm in a better position to try and make it happen myself. Not finance, you know, it's a question of, there's so many steps to make it happen. But it was of course what we wanted to do immediately. We wanted to tour it. We wanted it to have a life beyond Sheffield, and it should have. And I think it, I hope it still will.

And funnily enough, we are like a little family, the girls who are in that. And I bumped into Lena Kaur who is… They're just such gorgeous girls… Who is that naughty—they're all very naughty—that naughty one… I saw her at the theatre the other night. And we are like, we're totally like a family. And, you know, we lived in the same… Sheffield… by the by, my brother lives there, but when you do a play away from home, you all eat together all the time. We were like a family.

So it could happen again.

Yeah, I think so. I definitely won't be in it again. I definitely will not do that again. And we won't get the same past, that's just the reality of the matter, but I think as long as…

Cause when you said that the audience was very mixed… This is another reason why it should actually happen again because it should tour, in places like Bradford, for example.

Yeah, Leeds, Leicester, no, absolutely. But also, I would really love… since I got married, my husband, in addition to being a scientist is also French, and we've… He lives in Paris, I've moved there. So my life revolves around this station and the Eurostar terminal. But obviously, I'm coming back here to work all the time, and I am very keen to put this on there, but in translation, obviously, and with a huge amount of change. Because I want it to be about the women in the place where this is. And my grand idea for touring it will be that the family move to wherever we're from, so if we're playing it in Leeds, the family, I find the suburb in Leeds and we change details of the play to make the play located everywhere we go. I mean, I would love that to happen. And it's just, we're probably talking about needing to raise sixty, seventy thousand?

Wow, that much?

It's not cheap, theatre. And there's only five actors in it, you know. It's not an expensive show. I don't ask you to forgive me because it's the way… I have become just… After growing up in one of the most apolitical countries in the world, Singapore is about as apolitical as you can get, I realised, as I've got older, I'm giving vent to all the politics I didn't have when I was younger. But I… one thing that frustrates me an enormous amount as an actor, and the reason why I started writing, is because you are so stereotyped based on this. And there were several things I fought with. I fought with the fact that my name doesn't represent how I look. I refuse to change it because that's how I was born. I struggle with the fact that I was not born in this country. So the idea of the British Asian identity, for me, was something I had to learn. When I figured out the 'Asian', when people say 'Asian', they mean Muslim, I kind of went, 'Okay, I need to learn about that.' I struggle with the fact that I'm sort of pretty, I'm sort of not, but I'm not like skinny enough to be in telly a lot, on the TV a lot. I struggle with the fact that people tend to think I'm a bit too intelligent for my own good, and that I was educated before I became an actor. You know, there's a whole level of expectation that fits with the role of what it is to be an actress and the sort of parts an actress who looks like me ought to play that were really challenging for me to accept, because, as you will gather, I'm quite opinionated. And I've become much more resolved to it. When I started, it just made me so profoundly insecure. I was like, 'Oh my god, I've got to lose weight. I've got to talk less.' It was just a nightmare. And then I thought, 'Hang on a minute. Is it just going to have to continue like that,

and then, what, I don't work? Or we try and make this work somehow?' And it really, it bothers me that no one, apart from trying to make it change sort of subversively on the ground, no one blows the whistle on this stuff. And I probably wouldn't. To be honest, I probably wouldn't either, because you go, well then, does that make people stop employing you? So, for all my talk, I'm not as courageous as I think I ought to be. Because there is systematic prejudice in the way a lot of art is made in this country.

Maybe it's not that you are not courageous. Maybe that you are practical because you cannot really come through to other people, you cannot go to them aggressively. It would sound aggressive. So it's not that you're not courageous. It's that you are realistic. And correction. You are not 'maybe pretty, maybe not.' You are very, very pretty.

Oh, that's very kind. Thank you. But when you see what… if you ever watch horrendous things like *EastEnders*. I remember one of my very first…

I don't watch soap operas. Sometimes, sometimes…

Okay, don't. Actually, it might be interesting for you. Cause that really tells you, that is the barometer of what kind of popular England sees. But one of my first auditions was an open casting call for a new regular character in *EastEnders*. And they decided that they wanted to tick a big box and have an Asian woman in it. And it was one of the most horrendous, still, to this day, one of the most horrendous experiences I've had as an actor. Cause there were about fifty of us, fifty young girls in a room. And you had to kind of do these improvisations. And one by one, you were asked to leave. And it just became like this gladiatorial sort of fight. And there was this one girl, in particular, she works a lot, and, you know, she's talented, she's a great singer. She's not the most fabulous actress in the world, but she's like… Did you ever see *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*, that film? It's really lovely kind of part, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*, late 90's, part animation. But there's a character in it called Jessica Rabbit, the main character's… who's like a 40's siren, right? So she's sort of like that, with enormous boobs and really big hair. And this girl, Pria, looked like her. I've never seen a human being… So thin, and yet so voluptuous and gorgeous. And she just doesn't stop working because she looks incredible. It doesn't really matter if she can act, but she looks incredible on the camera. And that's common currency. I'm not saying that for all that's made, but that's a really valuable, that's more valuable than most other things in television, how you look.

It's amazing how television, media, mainstream media in general, they don't really give the people what they want. They impose on the people what* they *want. And tell, and justify that by saying, 'We're giving the people what they want.' I think the only way to subvert that is to be stubborn, so stubborn, and just keep working, keep doing things. No matter how hopeless it would look…

And you know, one of the things, one of the jobs I was proudest of was, it was a pilot that was made for BBC a few years ago. And the character was called Rachel. Nothing more than that. She was called Rachel. They didn't give her a surname. And she was a detective, a fairly high-ranking police detective. And it was about a Catholic priest who was an exorcist. And it was slightly sort of fantastical, but it dealt with the Catholic faith and these ideas of sin and possession. It was written by a gay, Catholic writer who had studied his faith inside and out,

and it was a really interesting social examination of the Catholic church, but told through a medium that was slightly fantastical. And it was such an incredible character, who was this sort of voice of reason against this priest who believes in the supernatural. And, this was probably about five or six years ago, and I started… I did quite a lot of TV when I first left, and then I didn't have it for a while, so this was the first big part I had auditioned for in quite a while. And I walked in, and there were a lot of actresses in the room who were more experienced than me, but we were all, you know, there was no one physical type. We all looked like we came from everywhere. And I got it. And I was astounded, because a lot of the women in that room were more exp… He just said that I had the right quality, I had the quality that he wanted in this woman. And I was so thrilled about that. And it was such a great part. And the BBC, when they commissioned the series, cause they took it on, it was really well made, wrote her out because they didn't want a police woman in it, they didn't want police procedure in this thing. And that was the truth of the matter, you know. There wasn't any anti-Stephanie Street campaign at all, but, you know, I was gutted, obviously, by that. But I was so thrilled for what that job represented for me as an actor. And that's how villagers respond to this one, cause you've got to. You either give up, or you keep going to auditions thinking, 'Yeah, this one is my mine.'

You know, you remind me of, when you said gay, Catholic priest, you reminded me of our gay character here. It really struck me, and it's really amazing how she says that, although she is a lesbian, which is thought of as the…

Haram, more haram than…

…the hugest taboo in Islam. And she says that Quran and prayers are what are keeping her going. This is really significant.

Beautiful, isn't it? She wouldn't have survived without her faith.

You can look through the Quran over and over and over again, and you'll not find anything, what the scholars would say about how terrible it is to be gay and how you have extra punishment in hell. There isn't such a thing.

And yet, that was uniformly the one thing that people took issue with.

Yeah, like in, with* Shades*, that the gay, Muslim character, this is a very interesting twist to it. Because, as you said, it's not, coming out of the closet is not for me a week without speaking with my parents. It's a fucking fatwa. So, how did you feel when you talked to her?

She's another one really like the real woman who's Mariam. She was great. She's very…

Did you talk to her specifically about the idea that how she found her balance between being a practising Muslim and…

Yeah, I found her through, she runs a support group for women, gay, transgender, and intersex Muslim women. So they meet once every two weeks and have coffee…

Is this like an organisation?

Yeah, the Safra Project. Safra. S-A-F-R-A. Safra Project. You must speak with them. So she, having been on a huge journey with her own life and her faith, she set up this organisation to empower other women, basically, who are having to make the really big decisions, life decisions, that she made. So she's there for support, really. And she has at one time been a social worker. She's a real sort of force for good. And she's really tough because she's had to be. She's had to fight almost everything. But so intelligent. The sort of…

She's very unique. Not that she came out of the closet. Not only that, but also that being discriminated against because she is lesbian Muslim, this did not cause a reaction against Islam in her. She refused to… It's like she refused to say, 'Okay, you speak for Islam, and you say that I'm going to hell. No, this is your opinion, not Islam's opinion, and I <u>want to stick</u> with it.' So this is really remarkable.

And she has done so much study of the faith. You know, she has done so much study of the religion and has made absolutely sure that she can retaliate with every single point.

I know. I've looked through verses about hijab, verses about gays, verses about stoning. They don't exist. They simply don't exist. Multi-marriage… It's amazing how a very, lies like these would survive fourteen centuries, even though they are very, very clear in that book. It's just that people don't read. They just resort to the shayk, and the shayk is liar, so to speak, most of them.

But what's so interesting…

It's easier to read. It's much easier.

Absolutely. What was so fascinating with, like I said, the young girls who really went for me on this, and they didn't really, but you know what I mean. There was one evening when, we'd had a post-show discussion, and we knew that they were all coming back to talk about, to raise their issues with the play. And I was a bit nervous. But they clearly hadn't, they'd clearly chosen to hear things and not hear… They'd seen the play, but they clearly had chosen to hear things and chosen not to hear things, and chosen not to register the fact that these women were based on real women. And then after the production, we had a discussion group, because we'd done so much work with the communities, we didn't want to just finish it when the play finished. So the theatre organised like a feedback session in conjunction with the police community officer, who was fantastic in Sheffield, to just do a kind of follow-up on what impact it had had. Sadly, it was when the Icelandic volcano happened. My sister had got married in Singapore, so I got stuck in Singapore. So I was on Skype through this. I wasn't actually there, and my director had to sort of deal with it all. And she said the discussions were really, really explosive, really volatile, about this issue of being gay and being Islamic, being a Muslim. And also with me having written the play, being a non-Muslim. Those were the two major, 'How does she have the right to write this?' and 'How dare she write about this character?' But by the end, everyone sort of agreed that it was more productive to have the initial debate and then the debates that followed than not at all.

Appendix 3. An Interview With Atiha Sen Gupta

A lightly edited transcript of an Interview with Atiha Sen Gupta on 29 July 2012 at a restaurant in Kilburn, London

Atiha Sen Gupta is playwright based in London, her first play, *What Fatima Did*, was commissioned by Hampstead theatre when Atiha was just 17, and it was put on in 2009 when she was 21. Atiha also wrote *State Red* which was put also on Hampstead theatre in 2014. Atiha is the daughter Rahila Gupta, the author and Southall Black Sisters activist, and the influence of her mother's politics and activism is clear in her writings about issues related to women and minorities.

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Do you give me permission to publish anything you tell me today in my research?

That should be fine, is there any way I could look at what you write about me before you publish it?

The thing is that if I finish the chapter and send it to you and then you tell me no I don't like that, I'll have to rewrite it.

Just to see that I'm not being taken out of context.

No, no, I'll definitely commit to what you say... but if I commit to what you say.. Yeah, there's no problem.

Ok. It feels like a social cause that you found the medium to voice out through theatre. Was it like that, or is it like the theatre that led to coming across a cause like this, Muslim women, or was it the cause of Muslim women or minority women that made you think, 'I want to do theatre' for it?

I think what happened, there are many things, I think, in any play that you write, things happen, sort of a variety of factors come together. It's never just one thing. But, when, in 2001, 9/11, when that happened, the climate changed. It felt, almost overnight, you could feel the way that people were looking at you, and it was, you know, I'm not Muslim, but I was taken to be a Muslim, and told things that were kind of racist, along the lines of being a Muslim. So I remember being thirteen, and I was on the bus to a piano lesson and an Irish guy said, 'Oh, she's a fucking bitch' or something like that. 'She's a fucking Paki. She knows where Bin Laden is.' He was drunk, but he was also racist. And I think that was very soon after 9/11 had happened. Even my stepfather who is not Muslim, but he looks like an Arab, if you want to say that, because he's got light skin and he has a beard, so he has that Arab Muslim look. He was going to work, and some guy said, 'Alright, Bin Laden?' You know, these small things, they're not big, major things but they're small things that reflect the big shifts that happen on the world's global scale. So I think it was partly that. It was also I had friends, I had lots of

Muslim friends when I was in secondary school, and one friend, Muzeena, just overnight, she started wearing the hijab. So one day, she didn't wear the hijab. The next day she came in wearing the hijab. And I said, 'Why?' and she said, 'Just because.' And that was the end of that. And in a way, our friendship, we became less close because it kind of, we didn't have the same things in common, she had more restrictions on her. So I think that was in my mind. I wasn't particularly inspired by her. I think it was in my head, but I didn't… I wasn't aware of it. So all these things kind of came together. I got a commission from Hampstead Theatre, and they said, 'Pitch us some ideas.' And I gave them maybe three ideas, and they chose this one. And also, as a minority woman, I feel I'm very much the other, so there is definitely that sense of relating to the other.

So, this was your first attempt.

It was my first play. But it was my first full-length play. I had written short plays before this. And I had never written about Muslim identity or the hijab ever. It was the first.

And if I may ask, you said you gave them three ideas. What were the other three?

I knew you were going to ask that! You're curious. The other ones, really bad now, looking back. Terrible ideas. One of them was about a guy who, I'm embarrassed to tell you, something about a guy going into a coffee shop, and I think it was called *Closing Time*. Sounds terrible, and I can't even tell you what the plot was, but it was about a man, I had some idea, some back story for this man who goes into a coffee shop and has, strikes up a relationship there, with the woman who works there. The second one was more interesting and more sophisticated. It was about Israel. And it was a story about, based on a family friend who, a Jewish woman who has gone to, British Jewish woman who goes to live in a settlement, and then comes back to her family friends who are British but critical of Israel, and the family dinner that takes place when this woman comes back. So that was the idea. They said no to that.

Did you kind of do any kind of research or ask around about hijab and the story of hijab or you just... you did?

I did. I didn't do massive amounts. I spoke to people. I looked up the stuff on the internet. I read about it. What else did I do? That was about it. So I spoke to a few women who had worn hijab and yeah, I just kind of researched it and looked at the history of it. It was interesting to look at the history of the hijab and how it developed, because it was pre-Islamic. It came before...

Yeah, yeah, and obviously, it's not... I'm being presumptuous here, but I'm pretty sure that you came across the fact that it's not a must in Islam, but...

It's not a must. Yeah, yeah, it's about...

But it's made a must by what I call the sheikh's mafia.

The Wahhabis.

Even before then.

But I think now, I think it's become an even bigger thing. I think in the 90's it's become even more politicised.

Why I'm asking about whether you did research or not is because there's a sense that I have noticed in the plays that you're not really interested in the political or religious aspects of hijab, but you're interested in the individual aspect of it, that you want to, correct me if I'm wrong, you said that, 'I don't want to be politically or religiously or historically correct. I want to talk about a woman, a girl, who is wearing the hijab, as an individual. Full stop.' Because, this is what's... this is why... Is it why I think it is your decision not to make Fatima appear, that you're trying to tell us that she is not there in the discussion about Muslim women?

It's many things. I think there is that sense that women, minority women, and especially Muslim women, in today's society, Western society, they're spoken about but they don't speak for themselves. But I also think that, my own personal opinion is that the hijab is oppressive, as a woman, as a feminist. So I think the hijab as a piece of cloth is not just a piece of cloth. I think it invisibilises women. So that also feeds into why Fatima isn't there. And I think dramatically it became the conceit and that was what worked. I can't imagine a play where Fatima is *in* the play. I don't know... Because in a way it's about what the hijab means to everyone else in the play—the mother, the brother, the boyfriend, the friend, the teacher. It's about... and very much, it's a Western, you know that Western idea of, all those different parts of Western society and what they're saying about the hijab and it's feeding into each other.

Well, this is interesting, because I didn't really think about that. I mean, you must be diplomatic in your life because it didn't appear at all that you do think what, what was her name, Aysha?

In terms of what she said...

It didn't appear at all. You made it very balanced.

Like neutral.

Yeah, very neutral and very balanced, that this is one point of view, and obviously, it's very strict, the one for Aysha, and there is the other point of view, the one who is also strict, the one who just alienates herself from others just because an idea came to her mind. Of course, I can speak only for myself, but I think that anyone who reads the play wouldn't guess that you are, yourself, on the side of Aysha.

Well, it's interesting you say that, but my friends, people who know me and who saw the play at that time, they said to me, 'Oh, you're very much like Aysha.' I think, maybe in terms of the character anyway, forgetting her opinions about politics, but the kind of feisty, angry, you know, that kind of thing. But, yeah, it's interesting, because I do think there is that kind of balance. Every opinion is sort of valued and weighed equally. I don't sort of come down. It's up to the audience member to decide.

This leads me to the next question, which is about the audience and the reception. What can you tell me about how people reacted, how, did you find any people, any angry audience who tell you, 'Why are you showing us like this? Why do you let, why do you show on stage people talking about hijab?' Did you get something like that?

I got, I'll come to that, I'll speak a bit about the people who, the majority of the audience were white, middle class, which is the case in any play that you go to, as you know. That it's very inaccessible. You don't have black people, you don't have working class people, generally speaking, it's a kind of very classist activity. So the majority were white middle class, and they liked, generally speaking, they liked the play. And then on a few occasions, I don't know why only on a few occasions, but we had some people wearing hijab coming in, and even once I saw a woman in niqab, she came in. Which is really interesting, because I've never seen a niqabi in a theatre, in a play. I mean, I've seen women in hijab go to plays, but there seems to be usually, sort of, um, what's the word, mutually exclusive. I've never seen a woman in burqa coming in to see a play. So that was really interesting. She didn't say anything to me. But we did a question and answer session once, and there was a few hijab-wearing women, and they were critical and they were asking questions. They said, 'Why doesn't she come? Why is Fatima not there?' And so I answered the questions the best way I knew how, to the best of my ability, and they seemed to accept it.

Did you feel that there's any kind of effect on... did you feel that you made some people think, and rethink their attitudes?

Who? Women who wore the hijab?

Both.

Both sides? I hope so. You know the scene which is the most...

I mean, in the q-and-a session.

In the q-and-a session? Yeah, I mean, it became quite heated. Not heated as such. It became lively. People were talking, people were bouncing back ideas. That was nice to have that kind of, it was genuinely a debate, because someone said this, and somebody came back. Somebody else said this, somebody else said that, and that was nice. I don't know, I don't know how... I think people are quite set in their ways sometimes. It's hard to make them change. I guess we have to challenge it, but...

Why did the Hampstead Theatre want that play to... Was it like, is there a kind of line that they are following: We want to represent the unrepresented? Or was it something occasional, just to create some kind of diversity?

I think they, I think it was that. They wanted to create a more diverse audience. They wanted to bring in a more diverse audience. I was the first, I think I was the youngest playwright to be commissioned. And it was my idea to do the, they didn't say, 'Can you write a play about the hijab?' I came to them with this play idea. But, I was very proud, that one of the most, one of the best things about *Fatima* is when, you know the people at the theatre, they do all the kind of breakdown of the audience figures, so they say, '20% of tonight was young people,

and 10% were black/minority,' and they told me that when *Fatima* was on they brought in unprecedented numbers of black, working-class, Muslim, all these groups that don't normally go to the theatre and don't come to Hampstead Theatre came in for the play. So that felt, I was really proud, I felt really happy that it was diverse.
What I think is interesting, though, is that there is a double standard because I'm not Muslim, and I was writing a Muslim play. And I was being presumptuous enough to say, I have the right to write about this. I'm only saying this now in hindsight because I've now written another play set in Israel about a Jewish Israeli boy and his family. And this play is not being put on anywhere. And it's a good play, in my opinion.

They aren't accepting it?

No. Hampstead haven't accepted it. And they've given me a commission. After they read this play, and they said, 'It's good, it's good, it's good.' They said, 'We're not going to do it.' and then they turned around and said, 'But here's a commission to write any other play.' So it's not about the play, the Israeli play. It's about, I think it's politically not... untouchable.

Yeah, Israel tends to be untouchable.

Yeah, generally speaking, yeah. And I find it sad. I think it's a kind of racism on the part of the establishment because I'm not Muslim, and yet I have the right, in their eyes, to write a play about Muslims, whether that be negative, critical, whatever. And yet, I'm not allowed to be critical or negative about Israel or a Jewish family in Israel because I'm not Jewish. So I think that's, I don't know if I've answered your question, but I think it's interesting...

Yeah, it's very interesting. Yeah, this answers the previous question, that, do they have a line they're following about conversation and dialogue, or is it just something that would sound sexy?

Yes, of course, and I think, I don't know, the people at Hampstead Theatre who did commission me, they are dedicated to new writing, to young writing, and I respect them for giving me my first break, but I think there is definitely the element, even indirectly, even if they weren't aware of it, of kind of, the hijab, it's zeitgeist, it's sexy as you say, it's kind of, it was the word on everyone's lips, you know. It was kind of post-9/11. So, yeah, I definitely think these issues, you know, Muslim issues are very much in vogue right now.

What's the possibility of producing it again and performing it again, somewhere else maybe?

It's interesting you say that, or ask that, because I met this guy who was working for a sheikh. Because he was going to give some funding. I was sent by Hampstead Theatre with their fundraising person to have a lunch with this guy. And he was really, I don't know if he was from Abu Dhabi. He was from one of the Gulf States. I don't think he had read the play. I don't think he was particularly interested. He was just money. He was like a checkbook. But he did say, 'I'd like to take it to Abu Dhabi and a college there, and I'd like the play to be performed by'--it was a girl's college. And I said, 'Oh, you know, tell me about that.' And he said, 'Well, I

mean, the majority of them wear hijab.' So that really blew my mind in terms of this play because the play is about...

That's really unexpected.

Right, isn't it. Because even the one hijabbed girl in the play, we never see her. So the idea of women wearing hijab, acting out the white jealous boyfriends, really confused me and made me think, 'Wow. How can you do theatre in different cultural contexts?' I find that really interesting. It never happened. I don't know why.

But, I mean, in the UK, did you ever have the idea, did you ever think about, 'I want to tour with this'?

I would have loved to. It never happened. I was 17 when it got commissioned, and then I was, in 2009 it got produced, so that's three years ago, I was 21, and I was in the middle of second year of my university degree, so I couldn't apply myself in terms of... I couldn't push for a tour. I didn't have an agent. I didn't have anyone... So I would have loved to have toured. It would have been great, but it never happened. One good thing that has been a consequence of it being produced is that people in schools act it out, so lots of young kids are still doing it now, in their drama classes. So that, for me, it makes me really proud. In London, yeah. I don't know if it's outside of London, but I know people in London who tell me that they're doing it with their kids.

Let's talk about feminism in general now. I was interested in... I read everything about you on the internet.

Oh, god, that sounds so weird, doesn't it?

It's interesting to know that your mother was in the Southall Black Sisters. I'm really interested in knowing your opinion about, if we could make, then, some kind of comparison, that black women, Caribbean or Asian, in Britain were some kind under the same situation that Muslim women are under right now. And they managed to voice out their issues and to be heard, make themselves heard. And they did things like Southall Black Sisters and other initiatives and other attempts, but do you feel that there's... again, we go back to the idea of rights are a two-way street. People need to respect you and to be human with you, but also, you have to represent yourself, and you have to work on getting people's respect and people's attention. So do you feel there is this kind of, this thing lacking with Muslim women?

n the sense that Muslim women haven't earned their rights?

Haven't really managed to organise themselves and to let the world hear them. Instead, they... I don't feel, I'm really asking you because, not because I have made up my mind and I want you to agree with me, but only because I want to know your opinion about this since you said that you have admired your mother's movement, and you've been with her, you marched with her when you were a kid, so... I do feel that Muslim women accepted the role of a victim.

Is that what you personally feel? Like, they're passive, and they're not agents. That's interesting.

Unlike black women in the 80's and 70's.

When you say 'black women',and by 'black' here, I'm using it in the political sense in Britain, which includes me and Asian and even you if you'd want to be black. And I think now it sounds naff to say I'm black, and people say, 'Oh, you're not. You're Indian.' But I haven't got a cultural identity problem. I'm proud of being Indian and eating curry with my hands, but I feel, politically, I feel very black. I think, it's interesting that you, I know why you do it, but you say 'black' and then you say, 'Muslim', as if it's...

Do you want to go there so that it's...

(The rest of the interview is lost)

Appendix 4. The Original Arabic Quotations from Nawal El-Saadawi

All the quotations come from the same book, which is a 1990 edited collection of five of Nawal EL-Saadawi's books written between 1969-1975. The three direct quotations are the following:

"الفعل شرط من شروط الحب الحقيقي. اما الحب الرومانتيكي فهو حب مريض بغير فعل. هو حب محروم يتغذى بالحرمان ويعيش على ردود الفعل." (السعداوي 1990, 112)

"وكان أحد وسائل القمع أن تجرد المرأة لا من قدرتها البيولوجية فحسب، وانما أيضا من قدرتها الاقتصادية والاجتماعية والأخلاقية وأن تصبح حياتها تعتمد في كل شيء على الرجل. وهكذا جردت المرأة من حقها في أن تعمل وتنال أجرا عن عملها لتظل تعتمد على الرجل اقتصاديا، وسمح لها بالعمل فقط داخل البيت (من أجل خدمة الرجل والأطفال) وبغير أجر، حتى تظل عالة على الرجل دائما، ولا تجد لنفسها مأوى غيره، ولا سبيلا للخلاص مهما لاقت من زوجها من الذل والهوان." (السعداوي 1990, 239)

"وهذا هو السبب في ذلك الذعر الشديد الذي تبديه الأمهات (أكثر من الآباء) حين يلمحن في بناتهن أي حركة نحو أية حرية. وهذا هو سبب تلك الكراهية التي تشعر بها الأم نحو أمها... تكرهها لأنها تحاول أن تشدها الى دنيا النساء المحدودة القبيحة التي تفوح منها رائحة البصل والثوم غسل الصحون والانغلاق عن الحياة الفكرية والثقافية في المجتمع الكبير." (السعداوي 1990, 256-257)

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