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Gendering the Diaspora: Experiences of British-Pakistani Muslim Women

By Aisha Anees Malik¹

Abstract

Migration and settlement accounts have primarily been men's stories within which women are either absent or represented by community spokespersons who again are largely men. The host community and state see their existence within policy perspectives regulating immigration. To fill this gap, this paper explores the gendered experiences of British-Pakistani Muslim women by investigating how they negotiate certain aspects of their diasporic lives. It builds on their narratives in matters related to education, employment, language, dress, and community associations. It discusses the pressures on women due to multiple systems of oppression created by their various identities and how women deal with them. The paper allows us to see women as agents instead of passive victims of patriarchal religious and cultural practices or even migration and settlement processes.

Keywords: Muslim women's voices, Diaspora, Diversity, Identity, Migration and settlement

Introduction

British-Pakistani Muslim women are just what the name suggests – British and Pakistani and Muslim. Their lives in Britain reflect all these multiple identities that inform their existence. There are some facets of their identity that they cannot do without, others they would not do without. They cannot escape the cultural facets of their being. Their parents/grandparents came from various parts of Pakistan and depending upon where they came from brought various cultural traditions and ways of thinking with them and passed these on to their children. Religion was also a part of this cultural identity, but it came packaged in the south-Asian traditions. They grew up in this country and became aware of what it means to be a British citizen, the rights this citizenship bestows upon them, and the opportunities that come with it.

This paper² then explores the fluidity of identity and association expressed or exhibited by women in their day-to-day lives through exploring their gendered experiences of education, employment, language, dress, and community associations. It builds on the narratives of women themselves explaining how this fluidity comes to their aid in adjusting to the multifaceted aspects of their existence. It also discusses that though beneficial in many cases, this may also add various layers of pressures on them to conform to notions of womanhood that respond to their various associations. Despite these multi-layered systems of oppression, these women strategize to overcome difficulties. In these strategies, they are enabled by the multiple layers of their identity. These voices of British Pakistani women challenge the

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² The paper is based on ethnographic data collected over 18 months spread over 2005 to 2007 for doctoral research in an ethnically diverse industrial town of UK, Slough. The enquiry is restricted to British-Muslim women of Pakistani ethnic origin living in Slough only. The name of some places and respondents have been kept anonymous or changed to pseudonyms to protect the identity of the respondents. The delay in publishing material was also intentional to safeguard the privacy of the research respondents. Some of the political discussions in the paper are specific to that time period only and may have changed since then but the relevance to women's lives within the community is still valid.

established perspectives that see them as passive victims of their patriarchal culture and religion by narrating some of their experiences in the process of migration and settlement, education and employment, religiosity, ethnicity and identity, and other facets of their day-to-day existence.

Re-Writing Migration and Settlement for British-Pakistani Muslim Women

Muslim women from Pakistan form the largest proportion of the Muslim female population in Britain (Ansari, 2004, p.25; Muslim Council of Britain, 2015). Although British-Pakistani women have often been the subject of policy debates in relation to forced marriages and the controversies related to the wearing of the *hijab*, there is a dearth of ethnographic writing on their experiences of migration and settlement within diaspora studies. Where their problems like the issue of veiling have been much publicised, their own views remain veiled. It has been acknowledged that their experience of migration has been different from that of men (Nielson, 2000) but there are few ethnographic works that bring out these differences.

Pakistani women have been labelled as economically 'inactive'. This has led to a marginalisation of their narratives even where research on diaspora and labour has been sufficiently extensive. Labour accounts of diaspora have failed to take their experiences into consideration as they were not part of the regular workforce and worked from their homes. Moreover, doing the full-time job of looking after the elderly and large families meant relegation to a private sphere. Governments interested in regulating the ethnic minority affairs to suit its own interests tended to interact only with community spokespersons and experts. Issues like forced marriages, covering up of women tended to give the impression of veiled Muslim women victims of oppressive traditions masking active dynamics of their lives and the choices they make.

Anthropological works highlight the strategies employed by the Pakistani diaspora in Britain not only to survive but also to advance in an adverse and hostile environment (See Ballard, 1994; Shaw, 1988, Mirza, 2020). Ballard highlights how, predominantly of rural origin, they capitalised on their peasant values of frugality, kinship ties, sense of communal solidarity³ to construct a social and personal self-confidence that helped them achieve this task. Though insightful, Ballard's account is not gendered. Although Shaw (1988) does address women within her examination of kinship and continuity, her perceptive observations are limited to networks of reciprocity within kinship and do not provide a much-needed link to larger sociological issues. Recent scholarship has largely focused on British-Pakistani women and marriage within the domain of transnationalism, immigration as well as reproductive behaviour (See Charsley, 2018; Charsley & Bolognani 2019; Mohammad, 2015; Shaw, 2011 & 2015). This scholarship, though quite noteworthy, places women within larger debates of transnational communities, centrality of marriage to continuity of immigration, the health of immigrant population within Britain and as such is driven by the demands of the host community. It even reverts to placing more emphasis on men than women in transnational marriages within the ambit of the relationship between men, masculinity, marriages, migration and labour (see Charsley & Ersanilli 2019; Ersanilli & Charsley 2019; Malik 2016). It is, therefore, pertinent to bring to fore the everyday lives of these women through performance of their identities and how they employ them to portray a more nuanced depiction of their diaspora existence (Mirza 2020) and creating their own spaces (Malik, 2019; Mohammad, 2013) in that life. An account of the experiences of British-Pakistani Muslim women from Slough in terms of accessing education and employment, expressions of language and dress, and various community associations does not necessarily speak for the entire British Pakistani community

³ Ballard views this communal solidarity as based on common religious inspiration as well as kin-specific moral loyalties.

but allows for a more nuanced reading of the aforementioned literature on Pakistani women in Britain.

Women in Slough, I found, are active members of their communities. They strive for a better life for themselves and their families. They are hampered by multiple systems of oppression; however, a detailed analysis of their daily lives demonstrates a struggle to overcome, by-pass, or make accommodations to these systems. They employ multiple strategies in the process informed variously by their being Muslim, Pakistani or British.

Education

Statistically British-Pakistanis have a poor education record⁴. They are only a rung above the Bangladeshis who are at the bottom of the ladder. Since the Indian diaspora has done remarkably well, leaving even the whites behind, an inquiry into religion as a contributing factor to Pakistanis' poor record merited investigation. During my fieldwork, I met girls born and raised in Britain who had not been educated. Nausheen who is the youngest of six children in her family was told by her Mirpuri (of or from Mirpur) mother that Muslim girls do not go to school. They stay at home, look after household chores and help their mothers. When they grow older, they get married, have children and raise them. Her mother took her out of school and went away to Pakistan for extended periods. On one occasion they were having a house built in Pakistan and her mother wanted to oversee the construction herself. Her father worked multiple shifts and couldn't take extended leave to do so. He couldn't take care of Nausheen if her mother left her in Slough. All the older children got to stay in school, and she was forcibly taken away by her mother to Pakistan. At another time her maternal grandparents were not well, and her mother stayed for over a year in Pakistan looking after them. *Nausheen* again had to go with her. Nausheen did not get a chance to finish secondary school due to these frequent trips. She turned sixteen and had to leave school. Now thirty-two years old and with children of her own, she was very resentful towards her mother. Nausheen alleged:

‘She [her mother] had been lying to me all along. It was my right as a Muslim girl to get an education.’

The fact that her older brothers were now sending their daughters to the university added to her bitterness. Her niece had recently graduated from a university. Though she was very proud of it, it made her sad as well, as she felt that she had been denied the same opportunity.

Pakeeza, another Kashmiri girl denied education, cited excessive responsibilities and a culture that expects girls to help at home as the cause of her lack of education. She stated,

‘My mother does not even know the *abc* of religion. She just made me take responsibility for younger brothers and sisters. I worked at home and after a while lost interest in school. Girls are supposed to stay at home and take the responsibility for housework. That's our culture in 'it?'

Pakeeza's father worked three shifts. All the responsibility of housework fell on her mother's shoulders. In the absence of a joint family who could provide support in childcare and housework, Pakeeza being the eldest, her mother fell back on her.

⁴ The 2011 census shows Muslims doing comparatively better than 2001 but they still lag behind Sikhs and Hindus (Nye & Ahmad, 2015).

Tabinda belonged to a much more progressive household where girls were encouraged to study. But life was hard for the first-generation Pakistanis. As she was finishing her A-levels, her mother found out that she was pregnant again. *Tabinda* recalls:

‘After being at home for sixteen years my mother had found herself a job and was really looking forward to it. She was so distraught. I told her I will take a year out and help with the baby. After that, I lost interest in education and didn’t go back.’

Tabinda managed to catch up on her studies much later in life. When I met her, she was forty years old and had just graduated from a university. Shabana gave up her studies for no particular reason. She was not told to do so by her family. She just gave up after secondary school. She claimed that there were no appropriate role models – no other girls around her at the time who had hopes of studying further. It just never occurred to her to continue studying. She said that it wasn’t the ‘*done thing*’ in her time. She, however, did work after leaving school.

The mixed trend shows that there is no singular reason for women’s lack of education. It can be attributed to their gender, class or simply their particular situation. Class has generally been an overlooked phenomenon while generalising categories such as ‘Muslim’ and ‘women’. Women in slough belong to families that not only have rural origins but are also working-class in Britain. Although Ballard (1994) points out that we need to be cautious in applying this term to British-Pakistanis as they are working class only in that they were employed in industrial jobs on arrival in Britain. They were not destitute rural labourers in Pakistan but small landholders who could afford to travel to Britain. They differed from their ‘working-class’ neighbours (p.21) in Britain in their aspirations, strategies, and expectations. Their aspirations may originally have included sending money home and buying houses here. Making costly extensions to their British homes, owning cars⁵, accumulating gold and mod cons for their houses, trips to Makkah for *umrah* and *hajj*,⁶ frequent holidays in Pakistan, marrying off their kids grandly has today been added to these lists. Education initially may not even have been on their agenda.

This trend is slowly changing. The Pakistanis in Slough are waking up to the importance of education. I was much admired for being so educated equally by men and women. Often when I interviewed councillors, they would invite me to come by later to their houses to meet their daughters. They complained that there were few positive role models for their daughters. They wanted their daughters to meet me and see how I had managed to balance married life with a career. Often, I would be asked the details of my marriage. Some of the men wanted to show off to their children ‘educated people’ from Pakistan. A councillor confided in me that his kids thought that everyone in Pakistan was illiterate. He wanted to show them a different view of people from back home.

I had been interviewing a local Pakistani labour party position holder. As in most interviews, I was also put to a thorough investigation. After the interview he invited me to tea with a group of friends at his home. The guests consisted of two councillors, members of Pakistan Welfare Association and a local journalist. Like most other Pakistanis I had met in Slough, they were very inquisitive about how I had reached England, since bringing people

⁵ Although Slough is considered a deprived area, the homes of Slough Pakistanis do not give the impression of deprivation. The number of cars standing outside most houses was astounding. Most families owned as many cars as adults. They did not have large enough driveways to park the cars in their terraced houses. The cars had to be parked on footpaths and neighbouring roads.

⁶ *Hajj* is the pilgrimage to Makkah obligatory for those who can afford it in terms of finances and physical health. *Umrah* is also a pilgrimage to Makkah but not obligatory and involves lesser rituals than *hajj*.

over from Pakistan was quite an issue for them. I told them about my scholarship. The journalist admiringly commented:

'Taleem aag aur paani ki tarha apna rasta khud banati hai' (Education, like water and fire, makes its own way). 'Oh! how we wish our daughters were also as educated as that.'

These wishful remarks always came after a thorough investigation of my life story and after establishing that I had not been westernised and hence was not morally wayward. For education must never come at the cost of westernisation and hence moral lewdness. There was always the praise for those girls who had gone to universities but wore *hijabs* and at least stuck outwardly to the moral norms of their religion and culture. The 'good examples' of such girls were often cited by parents when talking of young Muslim women. *Haji Akmal's* daughter had been accepted at Cambridge. She reportedly wore a *hijab*. They would comment on what a *shareef⁷ bachchi⁸* (pious girl) and how *laiq* (able) she was.

Wearing a *hijab* was not the only demand from such girls. Their marriages also seemed to be a concern for their parents. Chaudry Zulfiikar while introducing Riasat to me in his house said that Riasat was blessed with five daughters. He boasted,

'Riasat and his wife are illiterate, but their daughters are very bright. They are doing wonderfully in their studies. And you wouldn't believe me Aisha, they are such *achian bachchian* (good girls) they have told their parents you can marry us to whomever you wish. His eldest daughter is engaged to a cousin from *Riasat's* village back home you know.'

Riasat's daughters' may have earned him a lot of respect within the Pakistani community in Slough. It would also give a general impression that marrying within the kin is a norm and preferable, but many parents in Slough sought the suitability of the situation of the spouses while arranging for their daughters' marriages. Sughra's husband had two grown-up daughters from his first marriage. They lived with Sughra and Saqib. In 2006 *Sughra* was looking for a suitable match for her eldest stepdaughter who was studying at a University in London. She told me that although there were quite a few marriage proposals from within Saqib's family back in Pakistan, they would prefer to find a suitable match for her in England. Kareema, Sughra's stepdaughter too wore a *hijab* and had the outward appearance of the required *shareef bachchi*. In 2008 they finally found a suitable match in the UK and Kareema is now well settled with her husband. Now they are actively looking for a suitable match for their younger daughter Sara. But with Sara they have run into problems. She is not as educated as her sister, nor as outwardly pious, which means she does not wear a *hijab*. There are not many *rishtas* (proposals) forthcoming for her. They are now looking into proposals from Pakistan.

Sughra and Saqib were not the only ones who expressed this wish. I was requested by a Pakistani councillor whom I interviewed that he had a daughter of marriageable age and that if I came across any educated young Pakistani boy in Cambridge who wanted to marry, or if I knew of any Pakistani parents in Cambridge who were looking for a bride for their son, I should recommend his daughter. The councillor was a *baraderi* man, one with strong familial ties back home and he admitted that he could easily marry off his daughter in Pakistan. But his first

⁷ Shareef literally means noble, but here it is meant as an opposite to licentious.

⁸ Bachchi is a girl child. It is sometimes used as an alternate for daughter who may not be a child.

preference would be British-Pakistani. Only if he failed to do so, he would consider these proposals from Pakistan.

Employment

It has been widely observed that the employment statistics of Pakistani women are not very encouraging. Most first-generation Pakistani women refrained from working outside their homes. Religion was not cited as a constraining factor by the first-generation Pakistani women in Slough. Instead, low levels of literacy, lack of spoken English, burden of housework and looking after large families which included the care of ageing parents and young children were cited as the most common reasons for not going out to work. They did work at times from their homes stitching jackets etc. The lack of pride associated with low-paid work meant that women themselves stayed away from such work, if possible.

Pakeeza's father worked three different shifts. This meant that the entire responsibility of the household fell on her mother. There were no modern appliances such as dishwashers etc. to help in the housework. Being a large family, a lot of cooking, cleaning and washing-up had to be done. There was no time left to work outside the house. Tasneem recalls how when she arrived in Britain, she had no employable skills. She couldn't speak English. Moreover, she had to look after her ageing parents-in-law and later young children of her own leaving her no time at hand. It is not because the menfolk in her family thought that Muslim women couldn't work outside the house that she was kept from working. There was one time when she did work for a brief stint as a cleaner in an office. This type of work was looked down upon within her community circle. So, she later gave it up. Most of her kin in England, though from villages in Pakistan, were not very poor back home. They had small landholdings. They had immigrated to this country to supplement what they had, buy more land, marry off daughters etc. Having their women work as cleaners in this country was considered derogatory. This is also supported by Roger Ballard's work whose major contribution to the debate on labour migration from Pakistan has been to highlight the fact that there is a concentration of emigration from certain parts of the Indian sub-continent and those areas cannot necessarily be defined as those with the greatest excess of labour or of the highest levels of poverty (mentioned in Kalra, 2009: p.3).

To this effect, for some first-generation women it was a matter of much pride that they had had no need to work for a living and that their husbands had been able to maintain them in relative comfort. Bajji Kishwar insisted that she had by the grace of Allah been very blessed and has not had the need to go out of her house. For her prestige and respect within the community came from being able to afford to stay at home and not having the need to work. This was totally opposite for younger women for whom working outside the house meant more self-gratification and respect. Almost all of my younger respondents worked, in banks, in the local council, GP surgeries or TESCO. One ran her own driving school targeting female learner drivers only. Another drove a van owned by a manufacturing concern. Even both Bajji Kishwar's daughters worked, one as a receptionist at the GP surgery, the other at a local bank.

In addition to gratification and self-respect, another factor that necessitated their need for employment was the immigration of spouses from Pakistan. In such a marital arrangement, the Pakistani spouse was easily granted a visa, if the British wife was employed. Many conservative fathers actively arranged jobs for their daughters in such cases. Pakeeza gave the example of her father who found her work at a factory after marriage to a cousin in Pakistan. She continued working at the factory even after her husband had arrived and found work since they needed the money to set up their own house.

Working at places that allowed the families to build upon the reciprocity networks was considered an added advantage. Jobs at the local council, GP surgeries, retail stores that allowed discounts to employees were much sought after among younger women with lower to

medium levels of education. Here they would be in a position to help other Pakistani families who would then be indebted to return the favour⁹. This added to the value and prestige of these girls and their families within the community.

Language

Punjabi is widely spoken in Slough and easily serves as the medium of communication. Most respondents, young and old, spoke Punjabi with varying degrees of fluency. The first-generation Pakistani women spoke only in Punjabi. But their conversations were interspersed with English words. Baji Kishwar used two English words ‘like’ and ‘understand’ throughout her interview. ‘Nice’ seemed to be the most popular word, with most women using it to describe anything they liked. The food at the wedding was nice, my hair looked nice, and my clothes were nice, even my kids were nice.

The religious vocabulary of a *durse* (sermon) given in Urdu to other Urdu and Punjabi-speaking women could not escape English. *Bibi Jan*, a local religious lady, gave her *durse* in Urdu as Urdu is the language of the literate, even though most attending spoke Punjabi. She too used English words liberally. At the *Eid Milad-un-Nabi* gathering, while explaining the stories of the *wiladat* (birth) of Prophets in the Quran she exclaimed:

‘Jab Maryam pregnant hooin ---,’ (when Maryam became pregnant).
 ‘Jab Maryam ko labour pains hoin to Allah nein kaha Maryam khajoor ke darakt ko parkar lo, khajoor khao tumhari labour pains relieve hon gi’ (When Maryam had her labour pains, Allah said that Maryam holds on to the date tree, eat dates it will relieve your labour pains).

The trend continued till the culmination of the sing-song speech in a formal *dua* (supplication). Even the lady conducting the programme spoke in a mixture of Urdu and English. For example, asking ladies to sit quietly she would say, ‘*sub khawatein please quietly beth jain*’ (all ladies please quietly sit down), or even ‘*dua sit down ho kar mangain*’ (make supplication while sitting down).

The first-generation women did feel the lack of their English language skills. Nelson (2000) tells us that most of these women came from rural backgrounds and thus the rate of minimal literacy was quite high. This meant that they were dependent on either their husbands or functionaries of the host system to interact with the system to obtain educational, health or social welfare services. The husbands tended to interpret the women’s needs through their own perception of priorities. The functionaries were also useless due to either outright ignorance of their needs or prejudiced view of South-Asian Muslim women. This led to widespread discrimination against these women. Older women in Slough narrated accounts of the difficulty they faced while interacting with GPs and School officials in the beginning.

Baji Kishwar was a *matric pass*¹⁰ at the time she got married. Although there were many prospective proposals for her husband from within the immediate family, she, a neighbour’s daughter and not immediately related, was chosen by her parents-in-law only because of her education. She could understand some English but not speak it when she arrived in Britain. She coped by avoiding the need to go out of her house or relying on the community network initially. She added:

⁹ Shaw (1988) has also written of such incidents among Oxford Pakistanis. She refers to a Pakistani man, *Matloob*, whose social work in which he translates documents for other Pakistanis creates this network of exchange of favours.

¹⁰ *matric pass* is a term used for anyone who has passed his or her matriculation examination. These nationwide exams denote 10 years of schooling equivalent to the GCSEs in Britain.

‘The doctor was literally at my doorstep. We have always had the same doctor. We have always lived in the same place. There were *aapni* [our own] Asian girls there and *aapnay* [our own] Asian doctors. There were Indian doctors, they would understand the *aapni* language. They were here from the beginning. There was an Indian doctor, Doctor Chaudry, and Dr Salma. Dr Salma used to speak Urdu and obviously we can speak Urdu.’

Hospital and schools were the other two places she seemed to have frequented other than the GP’s surgery.

‘After the passage of some time, I got to know a little. I could answer a few things myself. *Kuch gullan mein understand kar laywan* [I could understand a few things]. I went out a little and so I came to know a little. Then I started going alone to the hospital. When they would ask me about my date of birth, my address, or my telephone number I could answer them. Then when I had to go to the kids’ school and then to get their reports, sometimes I would go, sometimes my husband would go. I would manage to understand.’

She also gave an account of her children’s school admissions.

‘The kids went to a nursery. My husband put them there. They sent a letter from the nursery for the school—that your child will go to such and such school. We filled the letter and sent it from home. Then the next-door neighbours’ children also went to the same school. The kids went along with them.’

She did admit that if she had known more English it would have helped her better. But she thanked Allah that those difficult days had passed and now her daughters had grown up and they could help her with the outdoor stuff.

Sughra and Mrs. Husnain along with some other friends of their age group had enrolled themselves in English language classes. They felt bad that they couldn’t speak English and wanted to learn. They wanted to learn enough English to at least enable them to speak to the doctors when they went to the hospital. Mrs. Husnain had volunteered in the primary school helping new entrants in reception settle down. Many of these children couldn’t speak English. The headmistress was impressed with Mrs. Husnain’s skills, but her English wasn’t fluent enough. She could muster a few broken sentences to get by. She offered Mrs. Husnain a permanent position if she learned English. This had motivated her to take English language lessons.

The young spoke in English with me and with each other, but it was amazing to see how they switched between the two languages. They used various Punjabi adaptations as they switched languages. For example, Pakeeza would pronounce a pound as a ‘pound’ when answering in English but if she switched to Punjabi in the middle of a sentence her pound would automatically become a pound.

Some third or fourth-generation school-going children did not speak either Urdu or Punjabi. For them, English was the primary language. But even these children understood both the languages. Their parents always spoke in Punjabi with them, and they learnt their Urdu from the *Bollywood* movies they watched. These movies were very popular. They constantly hummed Hindi / Urdu songs. Almost all children attended *Quranic* classes. They learned to

read the Quran by rote not to understand it. But it familiarised them with the Urdu alphabet which is very similar to the Arabic one. Whereas these school-going children could not speak in Punjabi but responded to it, their teenage brothers and sisters could, leaving one wondering if they would also grow up to speak some degree of Punjabi.

Kinza was 12 years old. She could speak some Punjabi but not as fluently as her parents who are second-generation British-Asians. She understood it perfectly as she spent a lot of time at her grandparents' house who spoke to her in Punjabi. She went there for dinner every night and stayed over at the weekends. Her grandparents had decorated a small bedroom in their house especially for her and she loved going to their place which was only a street away. She loved to watch all the new Bollywood movies as they came out. She sang quite a few Bollywood numbers for me. She also took *Quranic* classes. Although she came from mixed parentage, with a Muslim father and a Sikh mother, her mother was very keen to raise her children as Muslims. Kinza's religious learning involved learning about Pakistani culture from her grandparents and attending *Quranic* classes thrice a week.

Tabinda, a second-generation British Pakistani, was very articulate. She had worked abroad for eight years. She left that job after her marriage. When I interviewed her, she was working in a local bank in Slough. Born and raised here, she always spoke Punjabi at home with her parents and siblings. When it came to her own children, she managed to speak very little Punjabi with them though she regretted it.

‘[I speak in Punjabi with my boys] not as much as I should. It’s a shame my sons don’t speak Punjabi. I just yell at them in Punjabi from time to time. But they seem to understand what I am saying.’

Pakeeza too was a second-generation British-Pakistani. Her daughters spoke Punjabi quite well even though she communicated with her kids mostly in English. The only difference between her situation and that of Tabinda was that she had a network of extended family members living in Slough. Tabinda's parents on the other hand were the only couple in their family who had migrated to the UK from urban Pakistan which limited her children's exposure to the language.

The Visibility of Pakistani Attire

The dress code for Muslim women has been the focus of discussions in academia as well as media. Closely associated with this dress code is *hijab* which has come to symbolise Muslim women in the popular imagination. *Hijab* is the Arabic word for ‘curtain / cover’. In popular use, *hijab* means head cover and modest dress for Muslim women. Traditionally the rural Punjabi Muslim women wore *shalwar kameez* with a *dupatta* to cover their heads and folded around the upper part of the body to cover the breasts. Middle class urban women, however, wore *burkas* or *chaddar* on top of their *shalwar kameez* when they went out of their homes. The 1970s saw a surge of Middle Eastern trends. Men working in the Middle East brought back *hijabs* and *abayas*¹¹ for their wives. Even at that time this was a predominantly urban trend among the well-to-do middle-class families. With the rise of Islamist influence it became popular with the young, educated women, who wore varying degrees of *hijabs* and *abayas* in combination with *shalwar kameez*.

Pakistani Women in Slough generally dressed in *shalwar kameez*. Some covered their heads with the *dupatta*, some did not. Some pulled the dupatta down to cover their breasts, some folded it back leaving it fashionably clinging to the neck. Some women wore the

¹¹ The plural of *hijab* is *hijabaat* and that of *abaya* is *abayaat*, but popularly they are pluralized by an addition of the English ‘s’ at the end.

headscarf with the *shalwar kameez* and very few wore the *abaya* as well. The headscarf wherever seen was more popular with the younger generation.

Fashionable *shalwar kameez* were easily available in nearby South Hall where many of the women shopped. Many dressmakers or *durzans* locally stitched them in Slough charging anything between fifteen to twenty pounds. Frequent visits to Pakistan also enabled a steady supply of such clothing. Even mail orders from India were quite popular. The sheer visibility of this style of dressing in this type of Asian clothing in Slough was remarkable. Women claimed that times had changed and that there was more acceptability of Asian dresses at the workplace. Older women recalled how they couldn't wear *shalwar kameez* to work due to the racist behaviour of their co-workers and supervisors. Now most of them wore it to work as well.

My own dress stood out as an abnormality in the beginning. When I was coming to the UK in 2003 my mother had suggested that I should not take any *shalwar kameez* along as they were not suited to the cold English weather. I did not bring any. My English clothes worked well in Cambridge. But I seemed like an alien in the homes of British-Pakistanis in Slough. I hurriedly called back home asking them to send a few suits with anyone coming over from Pakistan.

This urge to blend in extends beyond Muslim Women. Tina, a third-generation Pakistani Christian girl, worked at a local salon. Normally she wore a short denim skirt with thick black tights. I met her at the local Pakistani dressmaker. She was getting a *shalwar kameez* stitched. Trying on her newly made sexy looking tightly fitting *shalwar kameez*, she told me that she was going to wear it to please her boyfriend, Shouquay. Shouquay I found out later was a third-generation British-Muslim of Pakistani ethnic origin, whom I had seen hanging with the local Asian boys. I wondered why it pleased him to see his girlfriend in *shalwar kameez*, a dress code associated with Pakistani/Punjabi women, especially when some of these young boys so vocally tried to dissociate themselves from their Pakistani roots. Shaw (1988) discusses how outwardly western attire of Pakistanis should not be mistaken for their weak attachment with their culture. Jacobson (1998) also addresses this Pakistani identity that is not a matter of choice for young people. Where western dressing has not been able to make the same inroads, the choice of Islamic dress by many young women has been used to challenge some of the cultural practices of the parents discussed elsewhere in the paper.

Aapnay Lok: Fluidity of Community and Identity

During my fieldwork with Pakistanis in Slough a phrase, *aapnay lok* (our people), cropped up again and again in the interviews of community leaders, men, and women, old and young. It was always there in their conversations - but its meaning is very flexible; constantly expanding or shrinking to include or exclude people; constantly changing frames of reference to define oneself either as an individual or as part of a community; sometimes contrasting and comparing to show one's individuality; at times finding similarities to explain belonging to a collectivity. But in all such instances, it was a way of differentiating and othering themselves from the larger white community.

There were "us" and "them" and then there was differentiation and grading within the sameness of "us". But this differentiation within the sameness I found out was not permanent. It was flexible; it was context-specific and at times it was even purpose regulated. There were layers of stratification within the Pakistani community in Slough based upon caste, class, regional affiliation, religion, gender as well as individual aspirations.

Upon my arrival, I was constantly advised on how to settle down in Slough with my two daughters. Women advised me to register at the surgery of Dr. Trivedi's at Whitby Road. Since all 'our girls' worked there, they would help me fill all the forms. It was easier getting things done where there are *aapnay lok*.

Baylis court school, a single-sex girls' secondary school, was recommended for my daughters. There were other very good grammar schools in the area, but Baylis Court was better as all 'our girls' went to Baylis court. It would be good for my girls to stay with *aapnay lok*. In fact, local councillors revealed that they were under a lot of pressure to help Pakistani parents get places in this particular school.

'Don't you have a British driving licence?' I was asked. A reply in negative generated a few phone calls and produced a driving instructor at my door. He offered me an intensive driving course and a guaranteed success in the test at a discounted rate of just sixty pounds. After all, I was one of them, an Asian, and was entitled to a different rate than what was on offer to all and sundry.

Language played a major role in this grouping. So the Punjabi-speaking Pakistanis would identify with the Punjabi speaking Sikhs. Then there were cultural similarities. Tabinda recounted how she felt as a young girl that although she dressed up like most other English girls, she was different. She said:

'Our skins were different, and we were not called Sharon or Stacey. We knew we were different. My dad was pretty liberal, but we were never allowed to stay out late. I moved from having English girlfriends to Asian ones. It made life easier. My friends understood the kind of restrictions that my parents put on me.'

So, in its broadest usage, *Aapnay lok* included all south-Asians which in Slough primarily meant Punjabi speaking Pakistanis and Sikhs from India. This network of 'one's own people' was a useful resource, enabling easy access to GP surgeries, schools, banks, local councils, even the local library. But then boundaries had to be drawn on Asians as well. Speaking of the Asian family living across the road one of the women said:

'They are from Kenya you know. Their habits are really different. You know they are not like us.'

So here 'us' included all in Slough who had come straight from the sub-continent rather than via east Africa. Even though this particular Asian family was Muslim, and their ancestors originally came from Lahore, the British-Pakistanis in Slough labelled them as the 'other'.

Narrowing down, *aapnay lok* meant their immediate kin-group. Chaudry Zulfikar's front room was fondly called by his wife '*Chaudrian di baiithak*'. *Baiithak* can alternatively mean a place to sit, a sitting or even a gathering. This was where Chaudry Zulfikar met endless gatherings of people from his kinship group all day long – the *gujjar baraderi*. While Mrs. Chaudry dished out cups of tea nonstop, the topics of discussion ranged from local elections to global happenings. It was not the only discussion that took place there. He was considered to be a knowledgeable man, which meant that he knew how to interact with the system. Advice on mortgages, buying and selling of property, how to apply for an extension to your house, applying for passports, MOTs of cars, marriages of children, marital disputes all were sorted out in the *baiithak*. Here 'one's own people' that were helped were the ones from his kinship group.

Local elections were a test of the mantle of one's *baraderi*. Support was drummed up for the *baraderi* candidate. It was not labour versus Lib Dems or Tories in the local election. Lydia Simmons was the only non-Pakistani councillor in the central ward. She is Afro-Caribbean and is from Labour. Her seat was up for re-election. She is well-liked by the Pakistanis and had served her ward well in the past but the chairman of Pakistan Welfare

Association, who was also a councillor from the Central ward and Labour party, like Lydia, was apprehensive. The Tories were planning to put up a *gujjar* as their candidate against Lydia.

‘I am really worried’, he said, ‘most of our people are ignorant and will have a tendency to vote on *baraderi* basis. If he gets elected on the *baraderi* basis it will be a great blow. With this type of politics, we are opening doors for BNP in Slough’¹².

But then *baraderi* is an easily available resource most people can draw upon to survive in this environment. In one of my interviews, Parri, a thirty-one-year-old British-Pakistani, born and raised here very proudly told me:

‘Forty years ago, my father was the only one who came to Britain from our village. He was all alone. Today, eighteen families of *Masha Allah* (with Allah’s grace) from our *baraderi* are here. It is all because of us five sisters and two brothers.

Through the instrument of marriage, her *baraderi* managed to settle around eighteen other families here in a span of forty years. For her, her own people had strengthened her position in this country. The young sometimes, however, found it difficult to identify themselves with ideals of *baradari*—at least this is what they said.

‘‘We are different from our parents you know’ (*Parveen*).

‘Na I hardly ever go back to Pakistan. I went there eight years ago, don’t want to go again’ (*Shaheen*).

‘My husband visits his family every year though. He takes the kids along. They love the village and the attention they get there. Eating all the candy they can, playing all hours outdoors and at the *khoh* (the well)’ (*Zahida*).

These responses were reflective of a sense of selfhood that was maybe different from that of their parents. But then some of the frames of reference they used to define themselves were the same as that of their own people. Pakeeza expressed a wish to do things differently from her mother. She wanted to give her daughters the life she had missed out on as a child. She took her daughters to all the places she missed out as a child, Legoland, Thor Park, hanging around in the town shopping etc. But in the same conversation, she gave meaning to even simple and ordinary incidents in her life through the myths that were a part of her Kashmiri culture. Her *dupatta* caught fire on her wedding day – a bad omen. She believed that from then on something had to happen to her new clothes as a result. They either got burnt while ironing or got ripped by catching onto something sharp. She also believed in the myth common among her people that two sisters should not be wed on the same day. One finds happiness, the other doesn’t.

‘Look my sister and I both got married on the same day in a single ceremony. I am happy, my sister is divorced.’

¹² Later I found out that Lydia Simmons lost her seat to Mr Ishaq Khan. When I was writing this thesis Mr Ishaq too was disqualified over a charge of electoral fraud in postal votes.

This myth of two sisters marrying the same day was also repeated by *Sara* when telling me about the divorce of a Pakistani friend of hers. Some of the young identified themselves as British-Muslims and not British-Pakistanis. They tended to use the language of Islam to rebel against the conservative traditions of their parents; to fight for rights to a marriage of their own choice, higher education, and right to work outside homes especially for girls. I must add here that I found huge resentment amongst first-generation Pakistanis of this trend. Some even went to the extent of saying that all these Islamist organisations and mosques of *wahabi* orientation were in fact funded by Jews.

‘They want to take our children away from us. They tell them that your parents are *kafir*, they know nothing of Islam, come to us we will introduce you to other like-minded devout Muslims whom you can marry and live a devout life,’ claimed Hafeez angrily.

Mayor *Rashad Butt* told me that once during his electoral campaign he was confronted by angry young boys who wanted him out of the area saying that elections were un-Islamic. He confided in me that these boys went to the Stoke Poges Lane mosque which is a *wahabi* mosque funded by Arabs. Although the treasurers of the mosque refuted the *wahabi* allegation, Mr. Butt wanted me to ask them if they had forgotten the expensive Rado watches the rich Arab benefactor had gifted them. Sanum, a young third-generation Pakistani, was forbidden by her father to read her *taraviah*¹³ *namaz* in that mosque on the same pretext.

Nadeem, a young professional in Slough, had married a girl of his choice. Nadeem disclosed that she was very devout. Both called themselves British-Muslims and were very vocal against some traditions of their parents which they termed un-Islamic. His family was initially against the match and would rather have him marry within their own *zaat*¹⁴ in Britain and if that was not possible then from Pakistan where they still had strong familial links. It had taken him three years to convince them. His wife was not keen on keeping any ties with Pakistan after their marriage and insisted that Britain was home for them. The recent controversies on the wearing of the *hijab* and especially the *Azmi* case made her change her mind. Nadeem related:

‘One day when I returned home, she just said Nad, just like that, let’s go to Pakistan for holiday this year. We must have some links with our people back home. I was stunned.’

So, whether the young wanted to amalgamate their Asian traditions with those of their British identity blending dangling earrings, *bindis*¹⁵ and bangles with the pencil skirts of their school uniforms or wish to break away from them wearing *hijabs* on top of their English clothing and aspiring to be part of a global Muslim *ummah*, they were actively in a process of defining their sense of selfhood. *Aapnay lok*, the Pakistanis in Slough, represented a group that was not monolithic and fixed in its features. Its members were active agents responding to changes around them and were actively strategizing to make a place for themselves in Britain. But whatever their internal dynamic they saw themselves as different from the larger white

¹³ *Taraviah* are extra prayers that are not obligatory and performed generally during Ramzan.

¹⁴ Caste: Muslims in south-Asia have retained some of the features of the Hindu caste system. However, its notion is very flexible and does not include issues of pollution. At times *baradari* and caste can mean one and the same thing.

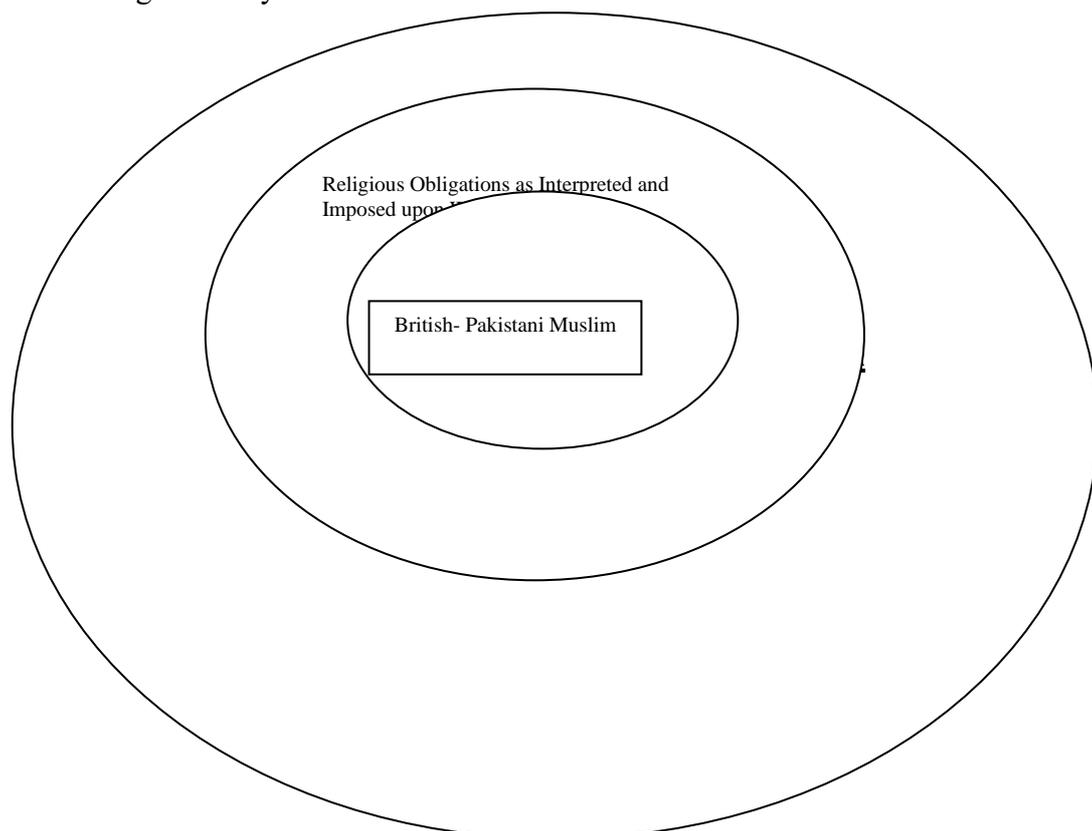
¹⁵ Decorative dot or jewellery worn on the forehead

community. The sense of self of this minority community was constantly being created and re-created. It may not correspond to the sense of the other seen by the host community.

Pressures to Conform

Community membership as described in the above passage may serve as a useful resource, but it can create its own pressures as well, especially for women. Discrimination against Pakistani women is multifaceted as well as manifold. It is multifaceted, as they must face gender discrimination as well as racial discrimination. The wider community discriminates against them based on the colour of their skin, the fact that they are Asians in Britain. On top of it, the recent upsurge of Islamophobia means that their religion is another marker of difference and hence a source of discrimination. It is manifold as being women they are discriminated against within their groups of Asians or Muslims or Pakistanis due to unequal power differentials between men and women. Asian cultures are inherently patriarchal and so are the popular interpretations of Islam.

The following diagram gives a purview of the multiple pressure systems that British-Pakistani Muslim women may have to live within. The concentric circles denote various pressures they encounter. Every layer is embedded in the other starting from the core of their identity that lies in their roots and starts from the familial systems to larger ones like being Muslim or British. First and foremost, they are members of the Pakistani community that sets up certain pressures that they need to conform to. For example, marriage to other Muslims, though acceptable in religion, is not tolerated within the Pakistani community. Only recently, owing to the risks involved in transnational marriages (Charsley, 2009) are they seeking compatible matches within Britain. Religion as perceived by the communities is again another pressure system. They are constantly reminded of how Muslim girls should behave by their families. The recent struggle by young Muslims to understand Islam by themselves and challenge their parent's version has led to more tensions within the families where parents are very apprehensive of this threat. Also in some cases, this increased religiosity may only be adopted by young men who may then forcibly try to impose it on women. These pressures cannot be dissociated from the marginalisation and discrimination Pakistani women feel at the hands of the larger society that sees them as the 'other'.



Young British-Pakistani girls are under a lot of pressure trying to balance the cultural expectations of their families, their religion, and the outside worlds of their schools and workplaces. Older women are wary of the moral lewdness of the outside. Baji Kishwar stressed: 'There is a lot of *'azadi'* outside. There is a lot of danger for our girls.' *Azadi* literally means freedom. But she used it in a negative sense where freedom leads to moral lewdness. The full meaning of it was elucidated by her acknowledgment of how worried she was for the marriage of her younger daughter, Sania. Sania dressed up fashionably and this was construed negatively by the baraderi. A relative pointed out that many in the family were gossiping about how 'modern' she was. She continued:

'Some are even saying that maybe she has a boyfriend. *Baji Kishwar* and *Karim Bhai* [*Sania's* father] are such *naik* [pious] people. They must control their daughter. She has all the signs of a troublemaker,' carried on the informer.

Sania's outwardly modern look was not due to her donning western attire; she did not wear any. She wore a *sari* to a wedding. It caused a stir among her relatives. Although a few other women were wearing *saris* too, they were all married. Within her circle of relatives, who belonged to villages in upper Punjab, *sari* seemed much more scandalous than the trousers she wore to school. Sania was saved from the community gossip by a marriage proposal from London. The boy was also a British-born of Pakistani ethnic origin. The proposal also caused hue and cry in her extended family as the boy was not from their *baraderi*. Baji Kishwar was a bit reluctant in the beginning to agree to the match. But fearing the worst, she gave in. She explained:

'At the moment *Sania* seems happy with the match and is agreeing to let us arrange it. What if we let this *rishta* go, and then arrange something from within our family, and she rebels.'

Shabana also discussed how distraught her daughters would get when their father wouldn't allow them something as simple as going out for shopping in the town centre with their school friends. He would always put his foot down and say: 'It doesn't happen in our family.' Shabana had had arguments with her husband over this. She felt that it was asking too much of these young girls. They have had to put up with a lot, growing up in these conflicting cultures anyway.

Girls who rebelled had limited options. Leaving homes was not easy either. Hibba explained that standing up to discriminatory practices in Pakistani homes, rebelling against forced marriages did not mean that they were like some of the white girls in their area. Women who fled from abusive homes had to put up with more difficulties in shelters. It was impossible to live with the type of women they had in these shelters.

'It is difficult to live with drunken women, prostitutes, pork eating women who are insensitive to your religious needs,' Hibba commented.

In fact, this was a huge issue. *Ishaq Khan*, one of the treasurers of Stoke Poges Lane Mosque was spearheading a demand by the Pakistani community in Slough vying for an exclusively Asian-women's refuge. These pressures manifest themselves in British-Pakistani women's access to education and employment. Women, however, devise strategies to cope with them like *Haji Akmal's* daughter whose *hijab* has enabled her to gain the trust of her parents to allow her to pursue higher education from home. Shehla's religious stance allowed her more choice

in marriage. But this strategy too can be a double-edged sword. They can constrain the right of women in matters of a divorce. Tabinda who was divorced from her husband under the state law now felt pressured to seek a religious divorce too.

While discussing the various pressures on them, most women's talk automatically reverted to the privileges they enjoyed because of being British. Within their interviews, there was inevitably a discussion of how their situation differed from women back home. A comparison of *yahan* (here) and *wahan* (there), Britain and Pakistan would entail discussions of the freedom and mobility to do things here. Women made a lot of the securities extended to them because of their being British nationals. These freedoms and securities were highlighted by giving examples from simple incidents in their day-to-day lives to larger issues such as marriage and divorce. British-born *Shabana* proudly told me that she knew how to drive and had her own car. She could shop whenever she wanted. As a comparison she narrated her experience in Pakistan. When on holidays in Pakistan, she always had to wait for a male family member to drive her to the bazaar. She also spoke of the hardships in marriage some of her cousins in Pakistan had to face.

'Alhamdulillah my husband is very good. But if he was to do something like this to me, I'll not take it. I'll call the police in a minute.'

Conclusion

Diasporic accounts of British-Pakistani Muslims marginalise women by either ignoring their experiences or relegating them to policy debates where their voices are represented by experts and community spokespersons. Where women's experiences are reflected, they are done so in settings that are removed from their day-to-day existence. This paper sketches the lives of women in a diasporic community by looking at issues of education and employment; language and dress code; community and identity; to bring out the rich dynamics of their lives.

To begin with, the article outlines how when it comes to education and employment, women give multiple reasons for its seeming neglect. Differing class priorities, lack of role models, the burden of responsibilities, notions of what adds to status, are some of the explanations that lead to their lack of education as well as unemployment. Not only women themselves, but the entire community is increasingly becoming aware of the importance of the two. The changing attitude is obvious in the pride that the community showed in the few girls that had reached universities as well as the value of girls who work in GP surgeries, local councils and shopping stores. An analysis of the use of language, dress codes, and notions of Muslimness brings out the diversity that is masked by a uniform conception of what it means to be a Muslim. A discussion of who forms the group *'aapnay lok'* (our people) gives a flexible and context specific notion of community that draws attention to the shortcomings of a homogenous minority group 'Muslims in Britain.'

The article also highlighted some of the strategies employed by British-Pakistani Muslim women of all generations in Slough to cope with issues related to migration and settlement; education and employment; identity and ethnicity. Although these women face multiple layers of discrimination and marginalization, they struggle to either overcome them or make accommodations. In this process, they were enabled by being members of many communities—Pakistani, Muslim, and British. It is, therefore, difficult to analyse them in one frame owing to the intersections within multiple categories that inform their existence.

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