

**Islamic Feminisms:
Ideas and Experiences of Convert
Women in Britain**

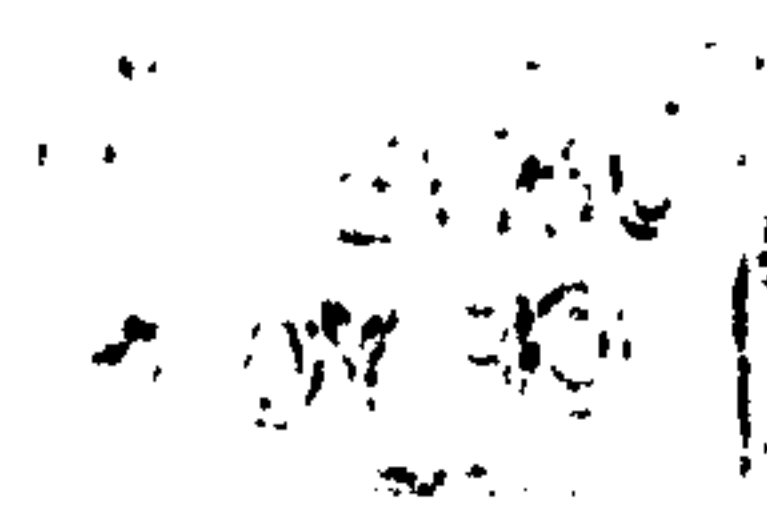
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Abstract

The thesis explores the importance of celebrating difference and diversity within feminism, investigating the challenge to welcome different women, including Muslims, living in the social and political context of a post-9/11 world. Within this framework, the research discusses the generation and acceptance of new feminisms, including Islamic feminisms, as part of the process of embracing diversity. The theoretical discussion focuses on the defining characteristics and boundaries of Islamic feminisms, asking what the theoretical and practical implications have for the women involved in such projects and for feminism as a movement.

The central themes are directed by and developed from the ideas and experiences of eighteen 'white', British women who have converted to Islam. Their views have helped to explore three interlinked subjects: conversion, identity and hijab. A central theme running through the study is the contrast between regulatory narratives and the actual lived realities of women. For example, whereas regulatory discourses promote an understanding of identities as static and narrow, the lived reality, illustrated by the participants, is that identities are complex, continual and sometimes fluid and changing. This is a process actively generated by individuals and groups.

The divide between fictional narratives and women's experiences is understood to have great significance for the roles and responsibilities of feminism: the feminists who participated in this study claim the identity 'Muslim' without wishing to discount their familial and cultural links. They see themselves as British and Muslim and were attracted to Islam, in part, because they find Islam empowering and liberating. They are far from the stereotypical images of the submissive, silent, obedient individual. Many highlighted the extensive rights and entitlements that they gained through their choice to become Muslim. This dissertation seeks to give voice to these women, who can be described as feminists even though some are wary of such terminology.

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Wal-Hamdulillah iRabbil ^Alamin

Note on Transliteration and Translations

Where Arabic words have been used, they have been transliterated conventionally, with pressed consonants and lengthened vowels underlined: e.g. ض - daad - is rendered as d, while ا - alif - is rendered as a. *Hamza* is symbolised with ' and the letter ayn with ^.

In relation to verses of the Quran, I was aware of the problematic interpretations found in the most commonly used English translations. Every translation carries a particular interpretation of the meaning, and these have in part, as authors such as El Guindi¹ have noted, lead to a number of misunderstandings of Quranic meanings, particularly with regards to women. As such, I approached individual scholars in order to confirm meanings. The same process was undertaken for ahadith and other Islamic sources.

¹ El Guindi, F. 1999:ix

Introduction

The attack on New York's Twin Towers on the 11th September 2001 was an atrocity that ushered in a new era in a battle that had quietly raged for some years. Suddenly, the general population in countries all over the world were made aware that they could become 'collateral damage' in a physical as well as rhetorical war between two polemic and polarised discourses. The killing of citizens in New York was swiftly followed by the killing of citizens in Afghanistan, and the death toll of people deemed by each discourse as 'of the enemy' has risen ever since. Building on old narratives, the self-styled opposing figureheads Bush and Bin Laden claim freedom, righteousness and glory yet purvey propaganda and destruction. At the most extreme end the discourses are being used to justify killing and torture and on a more subtle level, have initiated shifts in relations between individuals, groups and nations.

One such shift has occurred around a point on which the discourses agree: the active and explicit promotion of a narrative that places 'East and 'West' as dichotomous and incompatible. The terms 'East' and 'West' are used in this context as euphemisms for 'Muslim' and 'non-Muslim'. Although this type of othering is not new, having existed in various forms for centuries, it has become far more potent since the 2001 attacks. The impact of this narrative can be observed in Western countries such as Britain in the endless media debates on 'the clash of civilisations', 'enemies within', and 'community relations' and in the counter claims of self-appointed 'clerics' denouncing 'infidel governments'. The physical brutality of the narrative as produced by both discourses has been tragically felt by, for example, the individuals injured and killed in the London bombings of 7th July 2005 and in Islamophobic attacks.

This pitting of non-Muslim and Muslim against each other was the starting point of my research: how do people directly affected manage, and what do they experience? I decided that a useful way to explore the impact of the East/West binary would be to carry out

research with individuals who are Western *and* Muslim. That is, to ask how people whose presence contradicts such narratives live and negotiate their identities. As a feminist, I wanted to explore these relations of power and their impact on women. As well as contending with other forms of domination, women must contend with the additional controlling power imposed upon them because of their gender.

I decided to speak to a group to whom I belong: 'white', British women who have converted to Islam. This category seemed ideal, as such women hold indisputable membership to both labels - Western and Muslim. In addition, I wanted to find out whether they thought that their *choice* to become Muslim is viewed by the non-Muslim individuals around them and British society in general to be particularly problematic in the current climate. Similarly, I wished to explore how women view the narratives from outside and within the Muslim community that state that as Muslims they can no longer be British. From my feminist perspective, I hope that the research might help address a further layer in the imbalance of power: like other Muslim women, while appearing as subjects in media reports, the voices of converts are rarely heard and little academic interest has been paid to them².

The research is based on informal interviews and focus groups with eighteen women who volunteered to participate after contacting me as a result of snowballing via friends, acquaintances and Muslim organisations. As their biographies in Chapter 3 indicate, the women are from diverse backgrounds, are different ages and converted at different times of their lives. The fieldwork was carried out on each participant's terms: meetings were organised through emails or by telephone and I travelled to the location a woman or a group of women suggested - usually their homes - in order to do the interviewing. It was through their co-operation and enthusiasm that the research material was generated; it is their words that permeate

² Similar research on specifically British converts includes that of Myfanwy Franks (2000, 2001)

the thesis and in which the themes explored were discussed and developed.

Feminism became a general framework and subject for the thesis, surfacing during the course of the research as a common interest for the women and for me. Therefore, it was important that the aims, content and way that the research was actually done, remained true to this interest. In the case of the methodologies used, both in the gathering and analysis of the research, feminist criteria were essential. For example, as further discussed in Chapter 3, effort was made to meet and speak with participants in ways that sought to reduce the power relations between us, while the qualitative style focuses on the words and ideas of each individual. Furthermore, the analyses of those words are not only provided by me, but by the women themselves.

As a framework for the thesis itself, an aim has been not only to use feminist methodologies, but to increase feminist knowledge. As a subject to be discussed within the thesis, feminism appeared throughout the interviews on two levels: the role and definition of feminism and the possibilities of Islamic feminisms. I have made a distinction throughout the thesis between feminism as a general movement and ideal within which many different feminisms relevant to different women's needs and perspectives operate.

The need for internal debates on the nature and purpose of feminism was highlighted by the women participating in this study. Their ideas and experiences raised important questions about for whom feminism carries meaning and use, and how it is manifested. Discussing the position of women and their own situations, participants revealed what I understand as explicitly feminist perspectives. They are interested in women's rights and emancipation. They spoke about the need for activism and their own battles. Yet, the term 'feminism' was described as problematic, some women using it while specifying their meanings, others rejecting it as irrelevant to their experiences and outlooks. Their views pinpoint a

major challenge for feminism: to hold onto an identity and definition while including a multiplicity of women.

The participants also helped to review the 'white' Western ideals that have historically dominated the movement. More specifically, the form of feminism that the women spoke about and identified with - Islamic feminism - is contextualised within the boundaries of the feminist and Islamic paradigms it relates to: the rights and roles of women in Islam and feminist proposals that participants hold up as emancipatory and intrinsic to their daily lives.

This notion of boundaries, in terms of feminism and Islam, is an important one, and is further discussed in Chapter 1. In the case of the Islamic paradigm, the positions of the participants and myself are located within the traditions of classical Sunni beliefs and practices, and this standpoint has undoubtedly impacted on the ideas and themes explored throughout the thesis. That is, the boundaries within which an idea or practice is understood as Islamic or Islamically acceptable, while neither static nor rigid, were nevertheless very clearly drawn from classical perspectives. As discussed in Chapter 1 for example, a number of ideas propounded by groups and individuals who take reformist or revivalist positions are rejected as unacceptable from the classical Sunni perspective, but at the same time are understood as emanating from within Muslim discourses. This was important for everyone involved in the study, as each held her own position and space as a Muslim in terms of belief, practice and identity, yet felt the importance of engaging critically with the diverse ideas and practices advocated by Muslims over time and place under the banner of Islam.

The study also explores their initial conversions, asking how and why they converted to Islam, which is typically portrayed in mainstream British society as alien and misogynistic. A number of theories exist in relation to conversions, and these are contrasted with the ideas and experiences of the women themselves. Conversion is viewed as a complex process in which individuals

such as the participants are active agents, a choice rather than something that the women are subjected to.

Having explored the contexts and expanded the parameters of the thesis, the original research questions relating to identity are investigated. A major theme in the participants' discussions of their ideas and experiences was identity, which both as a process and as categories is viewed as complex. This complexity is contrasted with the static identities produced by regulatory, and by default reductionist, discourses. First, the competing regulatory discourses and the ascriptions they use to define individuals and groups are identified. These static, often racist ascriptions are then contrasted with the self-identifications of the women, who subvert the power of dominant narratives through their own understandings of their identities. The impact that these discourses have on the participants and their responses to them are also examined. It is argued that such processes are relevant to and for feminisms, including Islamic feminism.

A recurring theme throughout the discussions is the question of *hijab*, the forms of dress associated with Muslim women and by which Muslim women are primarily identified in the various narratives. Hijab is viewed as an exaggerated signifier for Islam and Muslim women such as the participants in this study, whose understandings are found to be very different to those of power-laden, ascriptive narratives.

While all the participants believed that covering the hair and body to some extent is an Islamic practice, some did and others did not cover to varying extents. For the women in this study, hijab is a question of choice, and its meanings are complicated. For some, hijab is imbued with principally spiritual meanings, for others it is used to function in very socially orientated ways. What is categorically agreed upon, is that opting to wear hijab is a choice that feminism has a duty to support. The participants felt that this support was needed more than ever in a time when bans on hijab and the restriction of rights for muhajibat [women who wear hijab,

also referred to as hijabis] are upheld in institutions as powerful and standard setting as The European Court of Human Rights³.

The thesis seeks to explore the subjects and ideas raised by the participants without replicating the reductionist narratives of regulatory discourses, or creating a new one. This aim is not only required of feminist research, but it is foundational in the pursuit of understanding people's lives and realities from individuals' own perspectives.

³ In November 2005 in the European Court of Human Rights a Turkish woman failed to overturn her university's decision to ban her from sitting an exam or attending lectures while wearing a headscarf. See Castle, Stephen. Strasbourg Court backs Turkey's headscarf ban in *The Independent* 11 November 2005

Chapter 1: Islam, Feminisms and Diversity

In order to explore the ideas and practices of the women who by their participation and dialogue made this study, the fundamental concepts that underpin the ideas and my analysis of them must be clarified. This chapter defines the interest uniting everyone involved: feminism and Islam. Through this research it has become increasingly apparent that the term *feminism* must be complicated and broadened in order to serve its purpose. By interrogating the terminology, it becomes easier to pinpoint exactly what the women are interested in: an Islamic feminism on their own terms.

In this oft-quoted 'post-feminist' age, it seems that the term *feminism* and the ideas that lie behind it are no longer clearly defined. At the same time, stereotypes of the so-called bra-burning radical seventies still remain, leading us to conclude that the most foundational of questions must be asked: 'What *is* feminism?' Superficially, the answer seems deceptively simple - the struggle for women's emancipation - but as we examine the history of women and their places in societies, and analyse emancipatory movements over time and place, the picture becomes more complex. Looking at the numerous feminist movements, feminist texts and feminist ideals promoted at different times and places and even within the same times and places, it becomes apparent that there are no hard and fast rules, no single definition and no agreement of 'feminist ideology' set by those calling themselves or being categorised by others as feminist⁴. Where once it was acceptable to talk about Feminism, it is clear that in reality there are many feminisms⁵. These feminisms are generated across time and place, arising from, and creating different agendas, ideals and goals.

So complicated is this multifaceted feminism that Mitchell & Oakley have commented, 'many of us have found it easier to define

⁴ Belleau, M.C. 1996:248

⁵ DeVault, M.L. 1996

feminism in its absence rather than its presence'⁶. The realisation that an international collective crossing the boundaries of time, class, and sociality can only exist through the application of very broad definitions has caused some to declare, as Delmar describes, a 'sclerosis' - a division into subgroups that are not only separate from one another, but hardened against each other'⁷. The root problem of this schism, 'a general political crisis of representation', gives grounds for Delmar to question the very survival of various forms of Feminism/feminisms⁸.

This plural post-modernism or 'ludic' feminism, as the embracing of diversity has been labelled, is viewed by some feminists such as Mojab to be in direct 'conflict with the internationalisation of women's and feminist movements' - an ideal she and others uphold and promote. This argument constructs a discourse in which a 'legitimate feminism' is placed in opposition to politically correct 'pseudo-feminisms'; the reader is asked in the style of Bush-Junior 'which side are you on?'⁹.

Such polemic defence of feminism against possible dilution is not necessary. In its summary of the most basic and popular understandings, the dictionary definition is a helpful starting point, defining *feminism* as the *advocacy of the claims and rights of women*¹⁰. What exactly 'claims and rights' can or should be is entirely dependent on the stance of individuals and groups in different contexts. However, the definition by virtue of its breadth is very useful, spelling out a principle that may unite any and all feminisms - the promotion of the welfare and autonomy of women.

Without wishing to reduce their complexities, two movements within feminism can be used to illustrate the different and specific agendas

⁶ Mitchell, J. & Oakley, A. 1989: 3

⁷ Delmar, R. in Mitchell, J. & Oakley, A. 1989: 9

⁸ Delmar, R. in Mitchell, J. & Oakley, A. 1989: 28-29

Others share this worry, for example Hymowitz laments, 'now it is clearer than ever that the dream of a world wide sisterhood is no more realistic than a worldwide brotherhood'. Hymowitz, K. S. 2003:36-51

See for discussion de Groot, J. & Maynard, M. 1993:189

⁹ Mojab, S. 2001:143

¹⁰ *The Shorter Oxford Dictionary (On Historical Principles)*, 3rd Edition. Vol. I. 739

and needs of feminists and women. For example, some of the predominantly 'white' feminist movements in Britain have historically centred on political repercussions of misogyny and the promotion of women's roles and equality in that 'public' sphere¹¹. Different again are Black feminists in the USA who have not only had to focus on sexist domination, but also the racism inherent throughout Western societies and within feminism itself¹².

Although different movements may differ in approach, political ideas and agendas, the collective goal can be understood as the promotion of women in society through liberation, agency and choice. Authors such as Bulbeck describe the need for balance between a fixed Feminism and the notion that 'there are as many centres as there are women'. In embracing diversity it is not necessary 'to dissolve into endless differences': the agendas of feminisms can remain united provided that feminists are willing to accept the authenticity and legitimacy of alternative viewpoints¹³. Accepting the diversity of women means accepting the diversity of feminisms, accepting our 'dissimilarities as well as our similarities'¹⁴.

By its very nature feminism is not constrained by the narrow ideals of a privileged, ethnocentric few, or relevant to a limited section of one society. The participation in an otherising discourse, in which the White woman saves her exotic and downtrodden sisters, is largely rejected¹⁵. As bell hooks explains, the picture-perfect

*...vision of sisterhood evoked by women liberationists was based on the idea of common oppression - a false and corrupt platform disguising and mystifying the true nature of women's varied and complex social reality.*¹⁶

¹¹ Mojab, S. 2001. The suffragette movements illustrate this trend.

¹² Maynard, M. 1995:265

¹³ Bulbeck, C. 1998:3-4

¹⁴ de Groot, J. & Maynard, M. 1993:150

¹⁵ It does survive to an extent, for example Hymowitz, K.S. 2003

¹⁶ hooks, b. 1990:29

'Sisterhood' does not need to imply exclusivity or essentialism and as such does not need to be and should not be rejected¹⁷. Rather, it may be understood as a tool of 'political solidarity'¹⁸ that can unite diverse individuals and groups through their feminist commitments.

It may be argued that recent trends within feminism are more 'feminist' - the diversity reflects the idea that *choice* is the feminist agenda, the core of emancipation in all contexts that unites the multiplicity of feminisms. This choice however, must not be understood as being limited to the predominantly Western, especially American individualist¹⁹ idea of unlimited and unquestioned rights and freedoms - rather choice differs in meaning from place to place. For some feminists, choice must be set against the impacts on wider society or the family, while for others choice should have no limits at all. This has great consequence for the articulation of a feminism: the context of where, when and why moulds the ideas and actions of activists and their quest for female emancipation. For example, many feminists also include on their agenda the emancipation of children and men in the context of social power²⁰.

Bulbeck describes the importance of the end of the hegemonic White Western claim to feminism that authors such as hooks have battled against²¹, drawing attention to the many feminist alternatives found across the world as well as in the non-White and 'hybrid' experiences within the West²². What constitutes a feminist agenda differs greatly according to the situation of women in a particular country or sector of a society. Instead of writing off post-modernism

¹⁷ Mendoza, B. 2002

¹⁸ hooks, b. 1997:396

¹⁹ Bulbeck, C. 1998: 5; McElroy, W. 1982

²⁰ hooks' definition or perspective (1984:26) follows this notion of brevity: *Feminism is the struggle to end sexist oppression. Its aim is not to benefit solely any specific group of women, any particular race or class of women. It does not privilege women over men. It has the power to transform in a meaningful way all our lives. Most importantly, feminism is neither a lifestyle nor a ready-made identity or role one can step into.*

²¹ See hooks, b. 1984; de Groot, J. & Maynard, M. 1993:4, 151

²² Bulbeck, C. 1998: 1-5; Lam, C. M. 1994: 865-893.

The shift in feminism to a comfortable embracing of difference without patronisation or othering has taken, according to Afshar, a decade. Afshar, H. 2001:218

as an exercise in fragmentation and relativity, it can be viewed as an expansion of choice and way of broadening of feminist horizons. Afshar discusses the necessity of different strategies in different circumstances and the new avenues of possibility that have been opened by post-modern approaches. Post-modernism uncovers the possibility that there may be any number of 'trajectories towards liberation'²³. As Mirza summarises succinctly,

*...a major issue... has been the attempt to reconcile the twin aims of recognising difference and diversity among women, with the imperative to maintain the impetus and coherence of the feminist movement.*²⁴

This demise of a single, exclusive feminism should not be mourned, rather the rejection of a homogenised movement and embracing of diversity²⁵ should be used as a starting point to ask not what feminism *is*, but what feminisms *can be*. This thesis is concerned with one of these feminist alternatives: Islamic feminism.

From a simplistic perspective there are two positions regarding the notion of Islamic feminism, one that accepts that such a feminism does or could exist, and one that categorically rejects the idea. For those who accept the notion, there is a broad spectrum of positions that will be discussed at greater length later in this chapter, but it can be noted that all have carefully questioned the complex, emotional, cultural and religious authenticity of Islamic feminism/s. In contrast, the positions taken by those who categorically reject the notion of Islamic feminism are justified through the defining of *Islamic* and *feminism* in ways that render the two terms incompatible. This polarisation may occur for several reasons: when authors define feminism as a Western-oriented, narrow concept (generally centred around a sameness/equality model which will be

²³ Afshar, H. 2001:218

²⁴ Mirza, Q. 2002:111

See also Belleau, M.C. 1996

²⁵ Hall, C. 1992; Moghissi, H. 1999:125; Spivak, G.C. 1991; ref. also in Yuval-Davis, N. 1994

discussed later)²⁶; confuse twentieth century extremist religio-political groups and certain Muslim cultural practices with Islam in general²⁷; and/or take a reactionary stance against organised religion²⁸.

At the most simplistic end of the rejectionist spectrum are those who base their conclusions on restricted interpretations of the concepts 'Islamic' and 'feminist'. A typical example of an author narrowing and confining definitions in this way is Poston's article on Muslim womanhood or 'Islamic femininity'²⁹ as he so problematically describes it, a term that essentialises Islamic concepts, Muslims and women in one fell swoop. Poston fails to consider that an Islamic feminism could exist due to his definitions of women as feminists and women as Muslims fixed in an irreconcilable dichotomy³⁰. To summarise, the argument relies on two assumptions. Firstly, he believes that Islam promotes inflexible and 'traditional' gender roles that pander to patriarchal values,³¹ in which the sole role of women is to be occupied in the 'domestic sphere'. This supposition is not supported by any evidence from Islamic sources and also demonstrates an ingrained understanding of sociality as divided into public/private, masculine/feminine, important/banal. Secondly, his understanding of feminism is limited to a radical Western model, which only makes sense in the context of secular, Western society and a desire for the eradication of gender. Consequently, for Poston and others supporting this line of argument, the concept of *Islamic feminism/s* is inconceivable.

This restricted and restricting view of women and feminisms has been successfully undermined by studies such as those of Belleau³² and Bulbeck³³, which effectively demonstrate the necessity of recognising the plurality of feminism. While Poston insists on an

²⁶ See Mojab, S. 2001:130, 137

²⁷ Badran, M. 2001:47; Majid, A. 1998:321; Moghadam, V.M. 2001:42

²⁸ See for example, Winter, B. 2001

²⁹ Poston, L. 2001

³⁰ Poston, L. 2001:57 The idea of 'feminine versus feminist' is also supported by Mojab. 2001:125

³¹ Poston, L. 2001:51,53,54,55

³² Belleau, M.C. 1996

³³ Bulbeck, C. 1998

opposition between an essentialising 'Islamic femininity' and monolithic feminism, Bulbeck seeks to dismantle the hegemony of one feminism over another. Bulbeck's approach, in which feminisms are required to engage in self-examination, or as Belleau states, 'be vigilant about the assumptions... underlying their positions'³⁴, results in an awareness of diversity. This perspective allows us to reject theories based on the idea of a hegemonic feminism which do not take alternative perspectives into account. The acceptance of difference also fosters an approach in which prejudiced assumptions and homogenisation is rejected - fixed definitions of 'Muslim womanhood' for example, are exposed as insufficient when subjected to post-modern scrutiny.

The linking of post-modern thought to the acceptance of alternative feminisms is another area in which Islamic feminism's legitimacy is questioned: that Islamic feminism is a worthless if not dangerous exercise in cultural relativity, its feminist credentials only backed by those with a sense of guilty Western multiculturalism.

This point of view relies, like that of Poston, on fixed, dichotomous definitions: here 'Islam' is viewed as intrinsically patriarchal and thus in conflict with any sort of feminism³⁵. From this position, an Islamic feminism is necessarily an oxymoron³⁶, and can only be produced via 'post-modern' i.e. relativist³⁷, fantasy. A number of authors espousing the view of Islam as anti-feminist appear to be basing their judgement on particular interpretations of Islam. Moghissi, for example, concentrates on extremist religio-political groups, asking whether 'Islamic feminism is a brand of feminism or a brand of Islamism'³⁸. This question will be explored later in this chapter. Nafisi echoes this point when she dismisses Islamic feminism as a 'myth' invented to enable,

³⁴ Belleau, M.C. 1996:258

³⁵ Hymowitz, K.S. 2003; Moghissi, H. 1999:126; Mojab, S. 2001; Winter, B. 2001

³⁶ Moghissi, H. 1999:134; Mojab, S. 1995, 2001; Nafisi, A. 2003:262

³⁷ Mojab, S. 2001:143

³⁸ Moghissi, H. 1999:146

*the rulers [of post-revolutionary Iran] to have their cake and eat it too: they could claim to be progressive and Islamic, while modern women were denounced as Westernized, decadent and disloyal.*³⁹

'Islamic feminism' is thus written off as a dangerous concept, symptomatic of an extreme post-modern and hence valueless and fragmented worldview that acts for the benefit of dominating powers. Problematically, this reductionism of Islam does nothing to fight the oppression of women carried out in the name of Islam, and at the same time acts to stifle debate. Such criticisms have been discussed by other feminists including Mernissi, an author well known for her admonition of sexism within Muslim socialities, who nevertheless believes that Islam and feminism, depending on the interpretation of both, are compatible⁴⁰. Ahmed also argues beyond black and white discourse, focusing on the negotiation of the realities of Muslim societies and Islam's pragmatic solutions with the Islamic 'egalitarian ethic'⁴¹, a negotiation that she believes holds possibilities for feminism⁴². Many other feminists, including Afshar⁴³, Badran⁴⁴, Hassan⁴⁵ and Mir-Hosseini⁴⁶, who could not be described by their sisters such as Moghissi as 'fundamentalist', all contribute to the debates, the result of which will surely benefit women rather than ignoring or rejecting diversity.

Thus, the opposing argument is that post-modern analysis does not have to be extreme or relativist. Definitions are vital: for feminism to exist, a non-negotiable foundation that defines feminism must be stated. However, this preservation of boundaries does not restrict diversity within feminism - beyond the core understanding of what it means to be feminist are many feminisms relevant to diverse times and places. It is a discourse of difference in which feminist

³⁹ Nafisi, A. 2004:262

⁴⁰ Mernissi, F. 1991a:vi-ix; Mernissi, F. 1991b:iv

⁴¹ Ahmed, L. 1992:63, 65, 66

⁴² Ahmed, L. 1992:235-248

⁴³ Afshar, H. 1998

⁴⁴ Badran, M. 2001, 2002

⁴⁵ Hassan, R. 1991

⁴⁶ Mir-Hosseini, Z. 1996

strategies of all types can co-exist, reflecting pluralism and a recognition of multiple voices and readerships⁴⁷. This is the post-modernism described by Clifford, the 'rewriting of established traditions... where feminist and non-Western writings have made their greatest impact'⁴⁸.

By accepting diversity, feminists will reflect people's realities⁴⁹, which is necessarily part of the feminist agenda. Part of this process is to shake up established feminist norms through reflexivity⁵⁰, as opposed to the much derided 'navel gazing', and this in itself should be welcomed as a feminist act. Post-modernism also resists what Asad describes as 'the forcible transformation in the translation process'⁵¹. This is the process through which, for example, Islam is represented as a fixed, anti-feminist discourse and feminism is limited to support the agenda of a restricted number of authors. Feminist success depends on the constant questioning of opaque translation and representation. In this context, where the methodology of feminists such as Bulbeck is applied, Islamic feminism is not only legitimate, but also important.

Feminisms should be viewed as a connected collective of coalitions and unities⁵² in particular the 'unity in diversity' as described by Brunt, founded on 'a whole variety of heterogeneous, possibly antagonistic, maybe magnificently diverse, identities and circumstance'⁵³. Feminism is able to 'recognize many struggles' and 'welcome contradiction and complexity' despite the space this provides for movements that some authors, for example Moghissi and Yuval-Davis, find anti-feminist⁵⁴. These spaces and their subsequent unity can be achieved through an acceptance that different women achieve empowerment in different ways. The process has been labelled 'transversalism', where one learns 'to

⁴⁷ Fischer, M.M.J. 1986: 196, 201

⁴⁸ Clifford, J. 1986:21

⁴⁹ Tyler, S.A. 1986:125 in Clifford, J. & Marcus, G. E

⁵⁰ Fischer, M.M.J. 1986

⁵¹ Asad, T. 1986:156 in Clifford, J. & Marcus, G. E

⁵² Yuval-Davis, N. 1994 in Bhavnani, K. & Phoenix, A. 1994:188

⁵³ Brunt, R. 1989:158

⁵⁴ Yuval-Davis, N. 1994 in Bhavnani, K. & Phoenix, A. 1994:191

centre in another experience'⁵⁵, or as Overing posits, to locate 'bridge-heads of understanding'⁵⁶.

With feminism no longer inhibited by narrow definitions of equality⁵⁷, the notion of an Islamic feminism can be recognised in a wider arena and, in theory, have more effect. What exactly Islamic feminism/s could and cannot be are explored in this chapter - the definitions, meanings and agendas. As Mirza highlights, there is diversity within the ideas labelled as 'Islamic feminism', the variation reflected by differences in Muslim thought and practices and also the socio-cultural differences across the Muslim world⁵⁸.

More broadly, theories and practices that could be engaged with under the name of Islamic feminism do not have to be specifically or exclusively Islamic. Issues of interest to many forms of feminism could be included. The next chapter will look at these specific issues in more depth: the relationships, tensions and commonalities that exist between feminisms. Islamic feminisms may speak to some women and some feminists, Muslim and non-Muslim, and they may not. In this context, great importance lies in the avoidance of essentialising women and their needs, and ignoring the complexities of identity and selfhood. In addition, the success of Islamic feminisms, both as theory and activism, is dependant on their appeal to a broad range of women. For Muslim women to identify with and use such a feminism, the Islamic paradigm must be one which the majority recognises as Islamic.

So what might 'Islamic feminism' mean? According to Badran, the term is a recent addition to academic writings, used by Muslim authors in the 1990s to describe various woman-centred activisms in the Muslim world⁵⁹. Within such studies it is discussed at length in terms of its relevance and acceptability as a feminist category. It has

⁵⁵ Yuval-Davis, N. 1994 in Bhavnani, K. & Phoenix, A. 1994:193 citing Barkley Brown 1989:922

⁵⁶ Overing, J. 1985:14

⁵⁷ For gender complementarity as an alternative see Afshar, H. 1997

⁵⁸ Mirza, Q. 2002:112

⁵⁹ Badran, M. 2002

been used in very different contexts to describe movements in different countries at different times, for example Göle's work in Turkey⁶⁰ and Afshar's⁶¹ and Mir-Hosseini's in Iran⁶²

The diversity is illustrated by the standpoints of Iranian feminists, whose positional differences are highly varied. For example, authors such as Mojab⁶³ and Moghissi⁶⁴ see Islam as ultimately patriarchal and anti-feminist, while others view feminism as not only compatible with some sort of Islamic paradigm, but actually happening on the ground. Afshar for example, discusses feminist possibilities in Quranic exegesis and the feminist movements in Iran who draw their inspiration from Islam, and with which they demand rights from the ruling clerics on their own terms⁶⁵.

Poya also discusses this trend, mentioning Iranians such as Rahnavard, Hashemi & Etezadi Tabatabai who promote women's rights in the domestic framework 'without confining them to the home'⁶⁶. However, Poya herself is more critical, striking her way between such ideas and those of feminists of Moghissi's ilk⁶⁷, suggesting that while feminism and Islam are compatible, women must be vigilant against patriarchal reality. Poya therefore stresses the importance of investigating social practices rather than concentrating solely on theological theory⁶⁸.

Mir-Hosseini takes a similar position, describing the Iranian situation as one in which feminists working closely with or even within the Islamic framework must be aware of the tension created between Islamic ideals and the reality on the ground⁶⁹, where sacred laws are interpreted and applied on a temporal basis⁷⁰. Her solution is not to

⁶⁰ Göle, N. 1996.

⁶¹ Afshar, H. 1998; 1994.

⁶² Mir-Hosseini, Z. 2000.

⁶³ Mojab, S. 2001

⁶⁴ Moghissi, H. 1999

⁶⁵ Afshar, H. 1996 & 1998a

⁶⁶ Poya, M. 1999:6

⁶⁷ Poya, M. 1999:4-8, 15-16

⁶⁸ Poya, M. 1999:157-160

⁶⁹ Mir-Hosseini, Z. 1993:vii, 1

⁷⁰ Mir-Hosseini, Z. 1993:2

join what she describes as the 'oppositional' and 'apologist' feminists⁷¹, but rather actively reread the case for an Islamic feminism. Mir Hosseini believes this is possible with the removal of the state's ideology of Islam, which she considers as polluted with power agendas⁷². Again, she describes the activists, from within the establishment and those from outside, who are joining forces to fight for new pro-woman laws⁷³.

Authors such as these discuss their feminist ideas not from a specifically Islamic framework, but rather a Muslim perspective or setting. Their work therefore focuses on the treatment of Muslim women and the subversion of patriarchy found within various communities and societies in the Muslim world and call for varying levels of reinterpretation of Islamic texts and laws⁷⁴. Mernissi for example, brought such issues to the foreground in her highly influential feminist writings, as discussed further in Chapter 6. Interestingly the positions of many the Muslim / reformist feminists seem to have shifted over time – Mernissi for instance, whose blanket criticisms of Islam in earlier works are alienating to the wider Muslim community⁷⁵, has been far more conciliatory in recent works⁷⁶. She now focuses her criticisms on Muslim practices and interpretations of 'a male elite'⁷⁷, rather than Islam itself or the early community, which she argues are in fact feminist⁷⁸.

As will be explored further in this chapter, the ideas of Muslim reformist feminists differ in many ways to the feminisms promoted by participants in this study. However, they all agree on one thing: the concept of Islamic and Muslim feminisms.

Thus there are a number of different meanings in use, as well as other expressions that are used both interchangeably and

⁷¹ Mir-Hosseini, Z. 1996:285 in Yamani, M. 1996

⁷² Mir-Hosseini, Z. 1996:285, 286, 315 in Yamani, M. 1996

⁷³ Mir-Hosseini, Z. 1996:286 in Yamani, M. 1996

⁷⁴ For example, Mernissi, F. 1991a:49-53 in particular

⁷⁵ Mernissi, F. 1975:138,139,140

⁷⁶ Mernissi, F. 1991a:vi-ix

⁷⁷ Mernissi, F. 1991b:iv

⁷⁸ Mernissi, F. 1991b:vii, viii, ix, iv

contrastingly. For example, Khan prefers the term *Muslim feminism* as she wishes to convey the movement as encompassing more than religion⁷⁹, while Karam uses *Islamist feminism* in order to convey the politically motivated nature of her case studies⁸⁰. Therefore, for the sake of meaningful analysis in this study, it is essential to clarify my own definitions.

As an Islamic feminism must be by its nature related to the beliefs and acts of individuals and groups, the danger of pigeonholing and irrelevant categorisation must be highlighted. When discussing Islamic feminism it should be made clear whether it is an ascribed or adopted term⁸¹; a label that is explicitly embraced, tacitly accepted or outright rejected. Abu Lughod, in her discussion of the 'politics of representation'⁸² relates the 'first lesson of feminist analyses' as located by Simone de Beauvoir - that the construction of Self and Other are 'rarely innocent of power'⁸³. The construction and ascription of definitions is especially laden with hierarchy if the process is located in the institutions of universities and governments, which Smith has described as the 'ruling apparatus of society'⁸⁴.

Therefore, when using terms such as *Islamic feminism*, the problematic nature of labelling must be acknowledged. Karam, for instance, reports that some women she interviewed, whom she understood in her analysis as feminist, not only disliked the term 'feminist' but 'vehemently criticized it outright'⁸⁵. Similarly, a number of women in this study, when discussing feminism, criticised the term for holding, in *Zh.*'s words 'a lot of baggage', pointing out the exclusionary views against Islam that some feminists expound and the consequent ability to identify with it. That is, 'feminist' is often seen as representing only a narrow, Western strand of its meaning, and it is this that the women had rejected. However, throughout the

⁷⁹ Khan, S. 2000:127

⁸⁰ Karam, A.M. 1998:4-5

⁸¹ Afshar, H. & Maynard, M. 1994

⁸² Abu Lughod. L, 1993:9 (-18)

⁸³ Abu Lughod. L, 1993:5

⁸⁴ Abu Lughod. L, 1993:8 quoting Smith, D. 1987:62

⁸⁵ Karam, A.M. 1998:9

interviews and discussions, those who had voiced their concerns continued to use the term, giving two reasons: that it 'may be defined in different ways'⁸⁶ and had 'no satisfactory alternative word'⁸⁷. These opinions highlight the notion that feminism has not been destroyed by its internal struggles⁸⁸.

As interactionists have posited, ascribing identities to an individual or group, particularly with labels that are rejected, is to varying extents, an act of aggression or power. In its most potent and negative form, this process reflects the categorisation of sections of people as deviant others⁸⁹. By categorising someone we take it upon ourselves to say who a person is and set the boundaries of definition. We also run the risk of homogenising people, inadvertently giving an ahistorical, static impression, our definitions glossing over differences in the pursuit of neat, academic classification.

Similarly, a label can magnify a facet of a person or group's character that is in reality a small element, giving the impression of coherence while distorting the reality. For example, the current interest in 'Muslim identity' in the British media and political sphere produces a homogenous image of a diverse group of individuals i.e. an overriding 'Muslimness', that is ultimately unhelpful to debate. In sum, we limit and are limited by our definitions⁹⁰.

However, by explicitly stating these problems it is hoped they can be minimised in subsequent analyses. Terms such as *Islamic feminist* should be viewed as 'tools of analysis'⁹¹ rather than labels. Badran highlights the need for context: if certain terms are used for analytical purposes, it must be made clear whether they will be used

⁸⁶ R.'s words

⁸⁷ A.'s words

⁸⁸ Alternative terms have been suggested, such as 'womanist' first used by Alice Walker in 1983 and used as an alternative by Black feminists, rejecting the appropriation of feminism by white women's agendas.

⁸⁹ For example, Lemert, E.M. 1967; Matza, D. 1969

⁹⁰ Rapport, N. & Overing, J. 2000:33

⁹¹ Karam, A.M. 1998:9

as 'explicitly declared project[s]' or as descriptions of identity⁹². It must also be clear if the terms are adopted or ascribed.

Therefore, locating a definition for *Islamic feminism* is not a straightforward task. Superficially it would seem reasonable to describe it as an umbrella term that refers to any project promoting the welfare and status of women from and within an Islamic paradigm. However, this does not take into account the different ways in which *feminism* and *Islamic* are defined, or the way in which the term is used across space and time - context is vital.

This is where the concept of flexible boundaries, as mentioned in the introductory discussions, is so important. The boundaries, or working definitions as they may also be understood, are conceptual tools for identifying ideas and practices that can be categorised as feminist and/or Islamic. As will be further explored in this chapter, the very notion of boundaries is wrapped up in debates over legitimacy and power - who has the right to say what is or is not feminist or Islamic? In addition to defining these concepts on their own, we must also ask how they interact and whether 'Islamic' can be understood with such diversity as 'feminist'. To do this, the foundational Islamic sources of *Qur'an* [Quran] and *Sunnah* and their subsequent interpretations must be explored.

The Quran is understood by Muslims to be a complete and uncorrupted revelation, meaning that no one can dispute the Arabic text. The Sunnah is the body of knowledge referring to the way of the Prophet Muḥammad, who is viewed as the embodiment of how Muslims should behave, 'sunnah' meaning 'habitual practice' or 'norm'⁹³. It is embedded in the *ahādith*⁹⁴ [ahadith] or recorded sayings and actions of the Prophet, which have been classified according to their reliability, judged on a chain of narration or *isnad*. A *hadith* [hadith] is classified on how reliable the chain of narration is and how many chains there are i.e. if there is an unbroken chain/s of reliable people [whose biographies and whereabouts are known in

⁹² Badran, M. 2002.

⁹³ Wehr, H. 1979:505

⁹⁴ *ahadith* is the plural of *hadith*

detail] going back to the person who was with the Prophet when he said or did whatever the hadith reports⁹⁵.

The verses of Quran are understood in relation to each other and in the context of the Quran as a whole⁹⁶. Similarly, the meanings of ahadith are understood in the context of other ahadith, their strength of reliability, and the circumstances in which the words or actions were spoken or done. They are also contextualised by the Quran, scholars rejecting ahadith that contradict the revelation. For the majority of Muslims, the *Ahl-us-Sunnah wal-Jama^ah* or Sunni Muslims, the Sunnah of the Prophet is the ideal and perfect practice of life lived in accordance with the Quran. For the Shi^ah the traditions of their Imams, descendants of the Prophet, are also valid.⁹⁷

Consequently, Muslims acquire their understanding of Islamic creed and jurisprudence from the Quran and Sunnah. It is the interpretation of these sources and their validity that is the key aspect to understanding Islamic feminisms, as through the process of interpretation people have drawn different conclusions.

The interpretation of *fiqh* - judgements relating to practices in Islam - is called *ijtihad* and involves understanding and interpreting Quran and ahadith in order to make judgments. Therefore orthodox understandings consider people qualified as *mujtahid*, one who performs *ijtihad*, to have an extremely high status among scholars: they must be able to understand the sources in context in order to deduce Islamic rulings. For Sunnis, the major compilation and interpretation of rulings was achieved by the Salaf, the scholars of the first three hundred years after *hijra*⁹⁸, specifically four *mujtahid* scholars from around the Muslim world: Imam Abu Hanifa, Imam

⁹⁵ Afchar, H. 1971:87

⁹⁶ Spellberg, D.A. 1994:9
Esposito, J.L. 2001:5,6

⁹⁷ Afchar, H. 1971:87

⁹⁸ Alternative definitions are those of the first 3 generations or the first 400 years or 4 generations.

Malik ibn Anas, Imam Muḥammad ibn Idris ash-Shafʿī and Iman Ahmad ibn Hanbal⁹⁹.

These *madhhabs*, or schools of thought, are still followed and Sunni *mujtahid* scholars usually affiliate themselves with a school, which view each other as equals. The system of *ijtihad* ensures coherence over time, within which there is flexibility and difference. The *mujtahid* by definition has reached the required level of scholarship. They neither contradict laws given in the Quran and ahadith nor the consensus of previous scholars. In the case of scholars of previous eras having made only two different judgements on an issue, the *mujtahid* cannot make a third but choose one of the two. However, where there are more judgments on an issue, it is actually incumbent upon a *mujtahid* to deduce their own ruling. The process of *ijtihad* remains valid and important for the rules to encompass the ever-changing situations of societies across time and place, while maintaining a coherent body of Islamic law.¹⁰⁰ Thus, a balance is achieved between the core rulings protected by *ijmaʿ* which ensure steady and unified practice and the flexibility over time and place provided by the practice of *ijtihad*. The Shiʿa, according to the different branches, follow various Imams which has led to varying practices.¹⁰¹ For example, the Ismailis follow a living Imam - the Aga Khan - and have changed their practices over time in a way that the Sunnis have not.

There are also groups who insist on using the Quran as an exclusive source of law and practice without the ahadith, for example the Zahirite¹⁰² and the now fragmented, 20th century 'Submitters'. The interpretation of Quran out of context and without ahadith has led to beliefs and practices that are very different to those of the majority. For instance, the early sect of the Khawarij who murdered the Caliph ʿAlī ibn Abī Talib, interpreted Surah [Chapter] 6 ayah [verse] 57 in

⁹⁹ They died 150AH/767CE, 179 AH/796CE, 204AH/ 820CE and 241 AH/ 855CE respectively.

Esposito, J.L. 2001:2 Afchar, H. 1971:91-92

¹⁰⁰ Kamali, M.H. 1996:62-84

¹⁰¹ Afchar, H. 1971:89

¹⁰² 4th century AH

such a way as to try to justify declaring other Muslims blasphemers and killing leaders they felt were sinful¹⁰³. Comparisons can be drawn between the Khawarij and twentieth century militant Qutbite groups such as 'Takfir wal-Hijra', who have declared war on secular governments, including those in the Muslim world, and also excommunicate most of the Muslim community¹⁰⁴.

What is valuable in the location of a definition of Islamic feminism is the plural nature of the majority that coexists with universalities in both Muslim thought and Islamic practices. Islam is understood as one *din*, or way of life and believing, under which the diversity of Muslims and their differences exist over time and place. From the majority perspective it is this diversity and flexibility stemming from the application of *ijtihad* and *ijma*¹⁰⁵ that sculpts the various feminisms in agendas and practice. In line with this, we must also question the inclusion of marginal interpretations and practices, as will be further discussed, on theological and feminist grounds.

This analysis highlights the different meanings and expressions categorised under the heading *Islamic feminism* by various authors. Azza Karam¹⁰⁶ identifies two useful terms in the context of late twentieth century Egyptian religio-political movements, *Islamist feminism* and *Muslim feminism*¹⁰⁷. In a modified form, I believe that they can be applied to individuals and groups outside Egypt, and take into account some foundational aspects of what, in terms of this study, could be included and excluded as Islamic feminism.

Islamist feminism is an ascribed term, as *feminism* is usually rejected by the women it is applied to on the grounds of its 'Western' and thus irrelevant connotations. Despite this problem Karam justifies its use as a way of describing the work that the women do, as they correspond to her definition of feminism: 'to improve

¹⁰³ Afchar, H. 1971:96

¹⁰⁴ Karam, A.M. 1998:83-89

www.ict.org.il/spotlight/det.cfm?id=379

<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2000/512/re4.htm>

¹⁰⁵ Afshar, H. 2003:2,3

¹⁰⁶ Karam, A.M. 1998

¹⁰⁷ Karam, A.M. 1998.

women's legal, social, political and economic awareness and position... by consciously participating in directly political activities'¹⁰⁸.

Karam argues that this feminism is articulated within an 'Islamist' paradigm, defining *Islamist* as the political movements pushing for their interpretation of Islam to be implemented throughout society - people and state¹⁰⁹. Such women view the emancipation of women as rooted in the 'recognition and respect for compatibility between the sexes instead of competition', placing a high status on the role of women as wife and mother¹¹⁰. These women also promote the idea of *ijtihad* to support their agendas.

Karam separates *Islamist feminism* from what she defines as *Muslim feminism*, usually an adopted identity and project, and at the very least an approved ascription. Included in the work of Karam's 'Muslim feminists' is the placing of Islamic sources within a discourse of equality between the sexes. These feminists are also defined by their call for radical reinterpretations of religious texts, and the right for anyone to do this¹¹¹.

I would like to interrogate and build on Karam's definitions of *Islamist* and *Muslim feminisms* by initially looking at the actual word use. *Islamists*, as defined by Karam, are individuals who belong to Egyptian political movements fighting for a religious state on their terms, particularly the Qutbite branch of the 'Muslim Brotherhood'. She uses the term *Islamist* citing two main reasons: that it is acceptable to those whom it labels while simultaneously emphasizing their religio-political mission¹¹². While I would like to include such women in the discussion of Islamic feminisms' borders, I wish to discard the term *Islamist* altogether. As a category, *Islamist* is used by many authors to include all politically active groups that work in the name of Islam. However, the political nature of a group

¹⁰⁸ Karam, A.M. 1998:4-5

¹⁰⁹ Karam, A.M. 1998:16

¹¹⁰ Karam, A.M. 1998:10

¹¹¹ Karam, A.M. 1998:11-13

¹¹² Karam, A.M. 1998:16

should not be used to homogenise highly diverse views: a peaceful campaigner for Islamic rights cannot be compared to a member of the aforementioned *Takfir wal-Hijra*. Such an association is not only inaccurate but also results in the tainting of all political activism as marginal, extremist and/or violent. Furthermore, *Islamist* connotes a person or idea that values Islam above all else, a status that theoretically all Muslims should aspire to, and which therefore appears to legitimise anything labelled as such, including the most dubious of groups.

It is the danger of 'lumping together' for which Moghissi rejects *Islamism* in favour of *fundamentalism*¹¹³. However, the term *fundamentalism* can be as equally homogenising and otherising¹¹⁴ and as Karam points out, is too closely linked to connotations of a specific Protestant sect. The term is an unhelpful Western ascription rejected by the people it is intended to define and as an English word bears little relevance to non-English speakers¹¹⁵. In addition, the use of the word 'fundamentalist' is a dangerous misnomer, linking such groups and their 'erroneous interpretations' to the fundamentals of the religion¹¹⁶.

In place of *Islamist* and *fundamentalist* I will use the specific names of groups, for instance *Hizb ut-Tahrir*, or if more appropriate, label them under the names of their main ideologues, such as *Qutbite* for groups inspired by Said Qutb. When the need for grouping movements together occurs, the rather self-explanatory *marginal religio-political groups* will be used in lieu of a more succinct term. By *marginal religio-political groups*, I refer to groups holding minority beliefs that claim a high level of religious inspiration and varying interest in political goals. These terms are more convoluted, but cover the same groups mentioned by other authors in the context of Islamic feminism with, I hope, greater transparency. It is also important to note at this point that the use of terms other than their chosen titles are ascribed.

¹¹³ Moghissi, H. 1999:66

¹¹⁴ Bracke, S. 2003:339

¹¹⁵ Karam, A.M. 1998:16-18

¹¹⁶ Lazreg, M. 1994:209; Majid, A. 1998; Badran, M. 2001

Marginal religio-political groups may be diverse in historical context and in their degrees of emphasis on the political or religious nature of their projects, but all see themselves as 'revivalists'¹¹⁷. These movements are also reacting to the environments in which they were formed¹¹⁸, products of a post/neo-colonial 'crises of modernity'¹¹⁹. Although their members in Western countries, particularly converts, cannot be explained away as products of colonialism, they subscribe within their discourses to a polarisation of 'The West' and 'Islam', leaving their followers with little choice in self-definition. This could be called a 'crises of identity', as will be explored later, illustrated by Hizb ut-Tahrir's assertion that there cannot be a 'British Muslim'¹²⁰.

The marginal religio-political groups all share, albeit to different degrees, the same goal of creating religious states in a framework governed by literalist and extremist interpretations of Islamic sources on both theological and political levels, for example those of the Mu[^]tazilah and Ibn Taymiyyah. Although such groups proclaim a 'return' to 'pure' Islam they cannot be considered orthodox.

Revivalists are typified by the Wahabiyyah¹²¹ [Wahabis], founded by Muhammad Ibn [^]Abdil-Wahab in Najd, Saudi Arabia, who based much of his creed on the opinions of the literalist Ibn Taymiyyah¹²². The grass-roots movements inspired by the radical teachings of Qutb, for example branches of the 'Muslim Brotherhood', and Maududi, for example Jam[^]aat-e-Islami in the Sub-Continent, have overt political agendas as well as a religious element. Similarly, the top-down Saudi monarchy has promoted Wahabi theology and political violence in the name of 'pure' Islam for political and economic gain. Marginal religio-political groups may also be defined

¹¹⁷ Mirza, Q. 2000 in Richardson, J. & Sandland, R. 2000:188,195

¹¹⁸ Moghissi, H. 1999:67

¹¹⁹ Moghadam, V.M. 2001:42

¹²⁰ Afshar, H., Aitken, R. & Franks, M. 2004:1

¹²¹ The term Wahabiyyah is ascribed. Affiliated groups often refer to themselves as 'Salafiyyah', as do other 'reformers', in reference to the companions of the Prophet and the Muslims who lived in the first three hundred years AH, in order to claim authenticity, piety and historical legitimacy.

¹²² Afchar, H. 1971: 93

as 'reformists' in the sense that they seek to reform society and the behaviour of Muslims to ways acceptable to their vision of Islam.

Despite these similarities in terms of marginality and desire to dominate, the differences in their methods, agendas, beliefs and actions must be recognised. In different countries political agendas, as has been illustrated, may come from very different perspectives - as resistance against the state or domination by a powerful minority. Even between groups sharing similar beliefs there are conflicts - note the war quietly raging between the rulers of Saudi and the militants holding the Khawarij ideal of usurping them. Despite the different contexts, their grouping together will be useful in a discussion of Islamic feminisms, as the umbrella term 'marginal religio-political' highlights their revival/reformist similarities.

Mirza describes the dream of marginal religio-political groups to purify the Muslim world's current '*jahiliya*' through a return to an idealised Islamic past which they locate at the birth of Islam¹²³. The 'new *jahiliya*', a reference to pre-Islamic ignorance used in this way first by Maududi¹²⁴ and later, having been influenced by Maududi, extensively by Qutb¹²⁵, refers to the weak political state of the Muslim world after contact with the colonial powers of the West and to a perceived loss of 'true Islam'¹²⁶.

In the case of the politically focussed groups such as the Brotherhood, the aim is to establish incorruptible 'Islamic' (in reality, marginal interpretations of Islam) governance in place of the current secular 'Westernised' rulers, while encouraging the people, from the grassroots, to become more religiously inclined in order to achieve a better society. In the case of superficially religious-focussed groups such as the Wahabi influenced Taliban, the idea is to purify the *people* i.e. control them through the state using narrow, literalist interpretations of Islamic sources. Like other religio-political groups, the Taliban use their name meaning 'The Students' to claim

¹²³ Mirza, Q. 2000 in Richardson, J. & Sandland, R. 2000:187-188

¹²⁴ Sivan, E.1990:22

¹²⁵ Kepel, G. 1985:47-49. Qutb refers to a present *jahiliya* throughout *Milestones*

¹²⁶ Mirza, Q. 2000 in Richardson, J. & Sandland, R. 2000:188

legitimacy through classical Islamic concepts, in this case through the high status of students, i.e. seekers of religious knowledge.

The existence of Karam's concept of 'Islamist feminism' is dependant on the agenda of the particular individual or group and subsequent interpretations of Islamic sources and attitudes to women and society at large. Ahmed and Karam give examples of feminists belonging to grassroots groups such as Zeinab al-Ghazali, founder of the Egyptian 'Muslim Women's Association' (1936-1964)¹²⁷ who called for the emancipation of women through the values of a purified Islam achieved in part by pro-woman *ijtihad* and female grasping of knowledge. I will argue however, that the extent to which her work may be viewed as legitimately feminist is contested: while such groups use a 'purified womanhood' in their symbolism¹²⁸, their actual benefits to women seem extremely limited¹²⁹.

In contrast to al-Ghazali, marginal religio-political groups such as the Taliban must be described as *explicitly* anti-feminist; it is this interpretation of Islam and religious-political movement that Moghissi suggests is irreconcilable with feminism¹³⁰. This view is also shared by Winter who defines the marginal religio-political groups as 'extreme right mobilization of religion to political ends' in which the 'control of women's behaviour' is paramount¹³¹. Badran disputes the narrowness of this definition, preferring to describe 'Islamism' as a broader project that may include more liberal interpretations, a view also shared by Afshar¹³².

Many of the arguments centre on the idea of agency. If women participating in the groups are in charge of their own agency, it is theoretically possible to view their activities in terms of feminism. This is a far more open and less power-laden discourse than talking

¹²⁷ Ahmed, L. 1992: 197-236; Karam, A. 1998:208-215

¹²⁸ Badran, M. 2001: 49; Shirazi, F. 2001: 106-107

¹²⁹ See discussion in Ahmed, L. 1992:230-231

¹³⁰ For example, Moghissi, H. 1999:126,134

¹³¹ Winter, B. 2001:9, 10

¹³² Badran, M. 2001:47; Afshar, H. 1998 & 2001:218

about women as victims of false consciousness.¹³³ However, the religious interpretations, political agendas and controlling zealousness of these groups as defined in this thesis, leaves their ideologies questioned in terms of the titles Islamic and feminist. Agency may be available in the political arena, but at the sacrifice of freedom as a woman or individual. Empowerment is subjective: a number of women who join for example, Wahabi groups or Christian fundamentalist movements, find a sense of emancipation from them¹³⁴.

However, empowerment can be viewed within a broader framework of what Spivak describes as 'effective gendering', a process of 'constructing constriction as choice'.¹³⁵ While feminists must accept a woman's choice and the way in which she experiences emancipation, the framework of such groups is limited to a minority of women and as such will not be included as Islamic feminism. Personal emancipation is not the sole criterion for feminisms, particularly when they impinge negatively on others and facilitate domination.

Like her concept of 'Islamist feminism,' Karam's concept of Muslim feminism is useful, but in the context of this study must be broadened beyond the borders of Egypt to include those claiming to reform the Islamic framework in a feminist way. Here they will be referred to as Reformist feminists.

Reformist feminism, with its claim to seek reform through Quranic interpretation and *ijtihad*, also relies on the idea of a 'true Islam'. Like the marginal religio-political groups, such feminisms may have a predominantly political agenda for social reform such as Abduh's¹³⁶ ideas for the Egyptian state, or principally religious reforms of Quranic interpretation, ahadith and fiqh (although religious veneers are often used to mask political agenda). This vision diverges

¹³³ Bracke, S. 2003:335, 337

¹³⁴ Afshar, H. 1989; Yuval-Davis, N. 1992; Franks, M. 2001

¹³⁵ Spivak, G.C. 1992; Yuval-Davis, N. 1994 in Bhavnani, K. & Phoenix, A. 1994:186

¹³⁶ Mirza, Q. 2002 in Strawson, J. 2002:112; Moghissi, H. 1999:67

dramatically from that of the Islamist dream as Mirza suggests, by a 'contrasting vision... of that ethically correct past'¹³⁷. That is, the reformist feminists construct an ideal past to which they look for inspiration for the future, but this past is interpreted in a very different way to religio-political extremists.

The search for the past is an important notion for Muslims, as the reliable sources and practices can be located in the early Islamic era. As such the past is often regarded as pure: for this reason most 'reformists' - whether from religio-political groups or radical feminists - claim to be reviving the 'purity' and authenticity of an 'Islamic past'. However, even the early period of Islam is not immune to reformist criticism, most advocating reforms of interpretation made by the Salaf themselves. Thus the reformist-feminists look to certain examples of the past such as the lives of Khadija and ^Aiysha, strong and knowledgeable women who are used as reference points for today's Islamic/Muslim feminists and their discourses.

Reformist-feminists want to take the process of interpretation into the hands of women rather than men, who they view as having had a monopoly on knowledge, Islamic or otherwise. Locating themselves from a feminist start point, they aim to filter out that which they view as anti-woman from what they believe to be a 'patriarchal' Quranic interpretation and *ijtihad* of early Muslims¹³⁸.

Badran describes the agenda of individuals and projects adopting the term Islamic feminist who call for 'Islamic feminist theology' and who may be described as Reformist feminists:

The basic argument... is that the Quran affirms the principle of equality of all human beings but that... fiqh... was itself heavily saturated with the patriarchal thinking and behaviours of the day... Thus a priority... is to go straight to Islam's

¹³⁷ Mirza, Q. 2000 in Richardson, J. & Sandland, R. 2000:191

¹³⁸ Afshar, H. 2003

fundamental and central holy text, the Quran, in an effort to recuperate its egalitarian message¹³⁹.

In addition, the majority of these feminists reject the secondary source of Islamic knowledge, the Sunnah, and this rejection of ahadith per se marks them divergent from the majority.

Authors such as Wadud-Muhsin¹⁴⁰ and Badran suggest a need for 'feminist hermeneutics' to correct what Badran views as 'a corpus of *tafsir* promoting a doctrine of male superiority'¹⁴¹. Such arguments are founded on the idea of reinterpretation, justified by the assertion, as Afshar describes, that

Islam does not recognise intermediaries between God and the believers and each Muslim has the God-given right to discover his/her faith and engage with it through... the Koran.¹⁴²

However, this must be understood in the context of verses in the Quran itself, which in Surat al-Isra' verse 36 tells us, in meaning:

Do not act or give judgments in the Religion without knowledge. On the Day of Judgment one's ears, eyes and heart will be asked about their deeds.

In addition, feminists may contest the validity of the claim that the previous eras' scholarship has been anti-woman, instead locating patriarchy in cultural traditions rather than classical Islamic scholarship.

Thus reformists such as Barlas¹⁴³ and Wadud-Muhsin¹⁴⁴ call for a rereading of certain verses and a reformulation of classical

¹³⁹ Badran, M. 2002

¹⁴⁰ Wadud-Muhsin, A. 2000: 3-21

¹⁴¹ Badran, M. 2002

¹⁴² Afshar, H. 2003:1

¹⁴³ Barlas, A. 2002.

hermeneutics. Yet, others, such as Abdullahi an-Na'im¹⁴⁵, are even more radical - to the point of explicit blasphemy according to basic Islamic tenets - by calling for the abrogation of all verses revealed in Medina. Many of the verses revealed in Medina are concerned with law: by advocating their removal a person not only contradicts Islam, but also sets a secularist agenda by attempting to separate religious faith and belief from law. While authors such as Mirza locate Islamic feminism within these reformist ranks¹⁴⁶ it is clear that the manipulation of Islam in order to make it fit a particular feminist framework is unacceptable to the Muslim majority. It is therefore erroneous and futile to expound it under the label of Islamic feminism.

In the analysis of an individual or group's relation to Islamic feminism, agenda and intention must be taken into account. Is the project in question motivated religiously, politically, academically or socially, or a combination of the four? The outcome will have an effect on the location of boundaries and legitimacy in terms of what constitutes Islamic feminism - whether a project can be described as Islamic and feminist simultaneously.

Legitimacy is foundational to successfully categorising ideas and practices as Islamic and feminist. However, deciding whether something has legitimacy or not is problematic, as it involves making serious claims for or against differing views. I would like to define legitimacy in its broadest sense and identify ideas and practices as Islamic/feminist by including what would be acceptable under both categories as understood by a majority.

If for example, an idea is feminist and acceptable in orthodox Islam, it must be classifiable as an element of Islamic feminism. In contrast, the legitimacy of ideas that fall within the definitions of

¹⁴⁴ Wadud-Muhsin, A. 2000; Mirza, Q. 2000 in Richardson, J. & Sandland, R. 2000:197

¹⁴⁵ Abdullahi an-Na'im, A. 1987:56 cited by Mirza, Q. 2000 in Richardson, J. & Sandland, R. 2000:200-201 & Mirza, Q. 2002 in Strawson, J. 2002:116 Abdullahi Ahmed an-Na'im 2002 ; Ahmed, L. 2002:90-91

¹⁴⁶ Mirza, Q. 2002 in Strawson, J. 2002:112

marginal religio-political groups and Reformist feminisms is called into question, as there are points of conflict regarding the feminist and/or Islamic elements. Can a woman preaching women's rights under the banner of a militant, excommunicating group claiming 'true Islam' be classified as Islamic in an orthodox sense? And are her goals, for example, of inflicting dubious political control over others compatible with any broad feminist definition? Is such an individual using feminism for its own end, or as a means to an end in the process of proselytising women into a political movement? Is this necessarily a contradiction?

Similarly, a person defined as a Reformist feminist has, most likely, a primarily feminist agenda. Does the use of Islamic sources necessarily constitute an *Islamic* feminism, especially if the sources are located in a dominant framework of feminism and contradictory to majority Islam? In terms of re-interpretation, what are the boundaries of Islamic legitimacy?

It is clear that the concept of interpretation and reinterpretation is a complex and contested one. This call for reinterpretation, if excluding verses of Quran and the ahadith, transgresses the limits of 'Islamic' and for the majority, ignoring the work of Salaf and Khalaf is also invalid. These are agendas stated by both Reformist feminists and marginal religio-political groups. The majority of Muslims accept the carefully analysed ahadith as a vital source of Islamic knowledge and would not accept a feminism that disregarded them. Similarly, marginal religio-political groups, in the eyes of many Islamic and Muslim feminists also seem limited in their feminist credentials.

This point is related to legitimacy in terms of who has the right to interpret Islamic texts. Returning to the ideas of classical Islam, the person engaged in interpretation must be qualified in traditional Islamic sciences, man or woman. However, there is no clergy or organised hierarchy of religious leaders for the Sunni. The people accept or reject leaders, who may or may not be scholars. A community chooses an imam and will replace an imam, according to

their needs. Similarly, within the wider community scholars are accepted on their merits. The great influence of the founders of the four schools of thought is a good example. If a judgement is made with the required proofs it is accepted, and while there is much consensus there are also differences of opinion. The different Shi'a branches also illustrate differences in who is viewed as qualifying for the Imamate, and subsequently practices have diversified.

Reformist feminists such as Barlas suggest that 'all Muslims may qualify' and that 'a believer's right to interpret religion derives not from social sanctions but from the depths of our own convictions and from the advice the Quran gives us to exercise our own intellect and knowledge in reading it'¹⁴⁷. While the same view may be expressed by other feminists, the actual practice of such theory could be very different.

The promotion of interpretation may be understood in several ways. For example, for the feminist working within the classical forms of Islam and with the Muslim majority, the promotion of interpretation would be understood as a call for the pursuit of education and knowledge by more people, women in particular, as the *mujtahid* and other forms of religious scholar must be highly qualified¹⁴⁸. For feminists defined as Reformist, the call for interpretation may mean a very individualistic approach, whereby each Muslim attempts to understand the religion from the sources in their own way. Again, we are faced with the question of legitimacy, this time in terms of qualification.

Important to the understanding of and development of Islamic feminisms, in addition to the interpretation of sources through *ijtihad*

¹⁴⁷ Barlas, A. 2002:210

¹⁴⁸ For example, in classical Sunni scholarship the *mujtahid* is expected, among other criteria, to be pious and intelligent, have memorised all the verses in the Quran and all the *ahadith* pertaining to judgement, know which verses in the Quran are abrogating and which are abrogated, which *ahadith* are unrestricted and those which are restricted, which are specified and which are unspecified, the chains of narration for each *hadith*, how to classify them and the history and character of the people within the chain, to know the issues of *ijma'* - consensus of the people from previous eras and that which they differed upon and be regarded as an authority on the Arabic language as spoken at the time of the Prophet.

and Quranic interpretation, is the concept of innovation or *bida*¹⁴⁹. Innovation within the religion is much debated. There are those, the Muslim majority, who divide innovations into two categories - 'good' and 'bad', and those who claim that all innovation, i.e. anything not practiced by the Prophet, is invalid. The two cases rest on a number of ahadith and their interpretation¹⁴⁹. Muslims who accept some innovations regard those as 'good' or *hasana*, if they bring benefit and do not contradict the Quran and Sunnah. Thus some innovations can be regarded as legitimately Islamic or acceptable within Islamic practice¹⁵⁰. Bad innovations are viewed as contradicting the Quran and Sunnah and are consequently rejected.

The acceptance or rejection of innovation may have an effect on the success of Islamic feminisms. For example, marginal religio-political groups and feminists within their ranks generally adhere to the idea that all innovation is bad and follow literal interpretations of Islamic sources. Their interest in women and their rights is confined within these borders. The ideas of Reformist feminists such as Abdullahi an-Na'im¹⁵¹ who call for the abrogation of Medinan Quranic verses or a rejection of the ahadith¹⁵² may strike a chord with a few but are inevitably seen by Muslims, including those who accept innovations as well as marginal religio-political groups, as being blasphemous and promoting unlawful innovation. Similarly, this idea of interpretation without qualification may be rejected as a contradiction of the Quran, including the aforementioned verse 36 of Surat al-Isra and also verse 9 of Surat az-Zumar¹⁵³.

The support and emancipation of women may be achieved through sensitive approaches to the classical understandings of Islam. If

¹⁴⁹ See Appendix II

¹⁵⁰ These *bida*¹⁴⁹ *hasana* include the addition of vowels and dots to the written text of Quran, innovated by the companion Yahya inbu Ya¹⁴⁹mar, the addition of *mihrab* and minarets to mosques, innovated by the Sunni Caliph ¹⁴⁹Umar, the use of prayer beads, and the celebration of *Mawlid an-Nabiy* the Prophet's birth, innovated by the King of Irbil, Abu Sa¹⁴⁹id Kawkabriyy Ibnu Zayni-d-Din ¹⁴⁹Aliyyi Ibnu Baktakın.

¹⁵¹ Abdullahi an-Na'im, A. 1987:56 as cited by Mirza, Q. 2000 in Richardson, J. & Sandland, R. 2000:200-201

¹⁵² Badran, M. 2002

¹⁵³ Which can be understood as meaning: *Those who are knowledgeable are not the same as those who are not knowledgeable.*

Islamic feminism is to succeed in its goals it must be seen as relevant and legitimately Islamic, appealing to the majority of female and male Muslims, beyond the politically specific marginal groups and disconnected academic theories.

The concerns of real Muslim women need to be addressed: there is little scope in the reformists' adherence to notions of fixed gender sameness, as will be discussed in Chapter 2. Mirza suggests that it is this disregard of difference and diversity that could disable future theoretical and practical progress¹⁵⁴. For the marginal religio-political groups, the success of feminism within their framework is limited.

The 'feminist' in *Islamic feminism* must be defined in terms of agency within the Islamic framework. It is the empowerment of women through the assertion of their Islamic rights and the rejection of cultural traditions that are falsely legitimised in the name of religion. Fundamental to such a project is the engagement with both Islamic and secular knowledge and participation within the fields of learning in order to redress imbalances of power. This furthering of knowledge is agreed upon by all feminists, even those who might disagree on other points such as Barazangi and al-Ghazali¹⁵⁵, as it opens a door to liberation.

The concept is not a new one: the Prophet's wife ^Aiysha was extremely knowledgeable in the religion, with her own school of thought, and she also held political power. The eminent scholar Fakhrud-Dīn Ibn ^Asakir¹⁵⁶ learned from many sources, including over eighty female scholars. Knowledge of business and politics has been held and put to successful practice by other famous Muslim women such as the Prophet's first wife and the first convert to Islam, Khadija. Such examples demonstrate the success of Islam as a source of female empowerment and flexibility. It is putting such power back into practice that Islamic feminists aim for¹⁵⁷.

¹⁵⁴ Mirza, Q. 2002: 120

¹⁵⁵ Barazangi, N.H. 2000:22-50; al-Ghazali as quoted by Karam, A. 1998:208-215

¹⁵⁶ Died 620AH. He authored a famous book on the meaning of *Tawhīd* - ^*Aqidat Ibn ^Asakir*

¹⁵⁷ See Afshar, H. 2003:1

While it is difficult to find a feminist group explicitly defining themselves as operating within a classical Islamic paradigm, Muslim women all over the world are working individually and in groups against injustices and for improvement in people's lives. Some demand education for women at all levels, in both secular and religious knowledge. Others promote the emancipation of women and the construction of wider society through a religious paradigm¹⁵⁸.

In Iran for example, women have been fighting for their education and the reclamation of knowledge, working from within and from outside the Republic and its revolutionary ideals, many of which were denied to the very women who fought for them¹⁵⁹. In the case of Britain activism is happening in many forms, including the existence of a female Muslim chaplain, the struggles of individuals in their families and communities to provide access to all types of education, the instigation of Muslim women and community projects and the work of individuals in politics, NGOs, academia and the media.

Islamic feminisms are not just a tool for subverting norms - feminist, cultural or otherwise - and neither is the concept just a cog in the 'new independence that allows cultures to negotiate their destinies in their own vocabularies'¹⁶⁰. Rather, Islamic feminisms can make serious and positive impacts on the lives of women, Muslim and non-Muslim, through alternative articulations of liberation.

The diversity within such feminisms is a positive characteristic. Marginal religio-political groups and Reformist feminism demonstrate the contestability of what legitimately constitutes as both *Islamic* and *feminist*. Much of the argument centres on the right of interpretation - whether anyone can interpret the texts, if particular methodologies

¹⁵⁸ Ong, A. 1999:355-363

¹⁵⁹ Afshar, H. 2003- 1982;1988;1996;1998; Mir-Hosseini, Z.1999

¹⁶⁰ Majid, A. 1998: 356

are needed to perform *ijtihad* and what can be considered acceptable within the boundaries of Islam or feminism.

There must be reconciliation between feminist principles and a majority understanding of Islam; without this Islamic feminism will be rejected from all perspectives, as fake-feminism or un-Islamic. That is not to suggest that Islamic feminism is a compromise, a small space where the separate spheres of Islam and feminism overlap - rather it is a genuine, legitimate feminism that holds a place within Islam, and a recognition that Islam has a role in the articulation of feminisms. Within this framework, Islamic feminism remains flexible, its diversity a reflection of 'the plurality of Islamic thought within the Muslim world'¹⁶¹ and I would add, the plurality of feminist thought.

¹⁶¹ Mirza, Q. 2002 in Strawson, J. 2002: 112

Chapter 2:

Feminisms, Rights and Entitlements

The previous chapter set down the development of a Feminism, from its promotion as a united sisterhood for all women that disguised a number of exclusive White, secularist Western agendas, to an acceptance of a wide range of feminisms specific to differing circumstances, times and places. This progression has been facilitated by the embracing of diversity, influenced by the post-modern or post-structuralist desire to dismantle social truisms and norms that are themselves, by way of the power inherent in them, anti-feminist. This new diversity has disrupted the false sense of coherence, creating a situation in which all feminisms agree on: the promotion of welfare and the emancipation of women. However, views on the ways this is to be achieved, and what emancipation may be, are a major source of difference. This new framework therefore allows the possibility of an Islamic feminism or feminisms to be not only conceived, but also *accepted* as feminism.

Chapter 1 also raised questions about boundaries: what can or should be included under the title Islamic feminism and what can or should not. While avoiding rigid parameters, the start point of a useful Islamic feminism was understood to conform to majority, classical Islamic paradigms and as a feminism, provide choice and emancipation for women and a balance of power for everyone. This chapter will build on these ideas, and ask more specifically what an Islamic feminism may look like.

The core concepts in Islam that act as a foundation for feminists will be studied, along with the way a feminism may take shape from this start point. This Islamic feminism will then be compared and contrasted to other feminist approaches, with which it may share concepts or pose radically different alternatives for similar problems facing women. The sources of tension and commonality revealed through the comparison may then act as a useful point of analysis in the unpacking of wider issues of power, issues that feminisms share

an interest in despite the different methods of addressing them. Finally, the specific issues that call for an Islamic feminism over other forms will be analysed, asking and answering the question, 'why Islamic feminism?'

At this point it is also important to note the difference, as discussed by the participants later in this chapter, between Islam as revealed belief and practice - the theory - and the ideas and actions of Muslims. Where negative Muslim behaviour is of course not always justified in the name of Islam, it is problematic that it sometimes is, and that individuals and groups may claim that their actions are somehow Islamic. However, such practices - which are often also practiced by non-Muslims living the same time, place and culture, such as FGM and 'honour' killing - are generally so easily contestable through the basic tenets of Islamic belief and theology that they may be dismissed as un-Islamic. That is, if a claim that something is Islamic cannot stand up to the most basic enquiry, it holds no legitimacy at all. In the case of 'honour' killings, any pretence by perpetrators to be 'promoting good and forbidding evil' is crushed by the basic tenet that one must not commit murder. The participants for example, discussed this gap between Islamic theory and Muslim practice in their experiences of conversion in Chapter 4.

Within Islam, and of foundational importance to those interested in an Islamic feminism, are the basic rights, entitlements and duties given to men and women that are rooted firmly in the Quran and Sunnah. Of primary interest to feminism are the rights discussed below, which are given to women and concern economics and familial relations. These areas are directly involved in the freedom and well-being of women and intrinsically linked to power, especially between men and women¹⁶². As will be described in more detail, women are given the right to a marriage gift, economic support, to earn their own money inside and outside the home, to own wealth including property independently and to inherit¹⁶³. However, rights also extend to the spiritual aspects of daily life. For example, it is a

¹⁶² Mitchell, J. & Oakley, A. 1989:3 citing Mitter, S. 1986

¹⁶³ Afshar, H. 1994

woman's right to practice her faith and obtain the obligatory Islamic knowledge. It is the *application* of these rights in daily life which participants and other feminisms such as El-Nimr¹⁶⁴, Mernissi¹⁶⁵ and Hassan¹⁶⁶ have argued must be at the root of Islamic feminisms. As Mernissi notes,

If women's rights are a problem for some Muslim men, it is neither because of the Koran nor the Prophet, nor the Islamic tradition, but simply because those rights conflict with the interests of a male elite.

In Islam, single women have the right to be protected and supported by their male next of kin, starting with their father. The gendered financial arrangements are founded in the concept of *nafaqa*, or family support, from the Quranic assertion that it is a man's duty to provide for and support his wife and children (and other members of the household) in terms of food, clothing and shelter. This is a specifically male duty (unless there is no man to carry out the duty) and a woman, even if she is far wealthier than her husband, is not obligated to contribute to the family's financial security, spending her own money as she wishes¹⁶⁷. Other social institutions such as the community zakat fund act as safety nets for women in financial trouble.

A woman can claim remuneration for the work that she does in the house, work that she is not obligated to do - whether housework or the suckling of her babies. If a woman does not want to do housework or nursing, her husband must pay for others to do it. All money, including that earned outside the home is hers and she has no duty to spend it other than on that which she wishes to. The recognition that domestic work is of equal significance to work outside the home, if not more, is an important aspect of Islamic feminism. Payment demonstrates that the 'domestic' is not inferior or in opposition to 'public', nor necessarily 'women's work' - according

¹⁶⁴ El-Nimr, R. 1996:87-102 in Yamani, M. 1996

¹⁶⁵ Mernissi, F. 1991b

¹⁶⁶ Hassan, R. 1995 (WEB)

¹⁶⁷ See Esposito, J.L. 2001:25

to Imam ash-Shaf[^]ii a man, if he cannot afford to buy bread for his family, must make it with his own hands. A woman is respected for domestic work but there is no assumption that she will or must do it.

If a woman chooses to marry, and it is her right to choose, she has the right to a significant pre-arranged sum of money from her husband called the *mahr*. The *mahr* is an agreed amount of money, gold or knowledge i.e. an agreed portion of 'wealth' that a husband gives to his wife on the confirmation of the marriage contract or at a given time after. Owned independently and without obligation by a woman along with her other wealth, the *mahr* may be seen to illustrate a woman's independence and the promotion of financial and intellectual autonomy. The Quran also specifies in Surat an-Nisa' verse 4 that the *mahr* is for the woman and is controlled by her - it is not a dower where a man 'buys' a wife from her father¹⁶⁸. The verse may be translated / interpreted in its most basic sense as:

Give women on marriage their mahr as a free gift; but if they, of their own pleasure, give any part of it to you, you may accept and enjoy it

Economic freedom and independence is reinforced by a woman's right to inherit and own property separately from that of her family¹⁶⁹, demonstrated in Surat an-Nisa' verse 7 which can be translated / interpreted in its most basic sense as:

From what is left by parents and those nearest related there is a share for men and a share for women, whether the property is small or large, a specified share

According to the Islamic texts, men and women inherit, but in different proportions: male heirs receiving twice that of female heirs¹⁷⁰. Although some feminists have suggested that this is unjust and reveals a lack of status for women in Islam, the context must be

¹⁶⁸ See Esposito, J.L, 2001:4,23

¹⁶⁹ See Esposito, J.L, 2001:23

¹⁷⁰ See Esposito, J.L, 2001:38

taken into account: a woman has no obligation in spending or saving her wealth, while a man has a number of financial duties that the laws on inheritance take into account. The details of inheritance are further explained in Surat an-Nisa' verse 11, a part of which may be translated / interpreted in its most basic sense as:

Allah directs you with regards to your children's inheritance: for the male, a portion equal to that of two females: If there are only daughters, two or more, their share is two-thirds of the inheritance; if there is only one, her share is a half. For parents, a share of one sixth of the inheritance goes to each, if the deceased left children; if there are no children, and the parents are the sole heirs, the mother receives a third; if the deceased left brothers or sisters the mother receives a sixth. The distribution in all cases comes after the payment of legacies and debts...

Each spouse has certain rights over the other, the *nafaqa* being a duty of a husband towards his wife and part of his *qawwamiyyah*, which may be translated as 'responsibility'. Thus men have a responsibility towards women, including the *qawwamiyyah* of a wife's support and maintenance. This *qawwamiyyah*, or responsibility of the man towards the woman is shown in the first line of Surat an-Nisa' verse 34, which can be translated/interpreted in its most basic sense as:

Men are the protectors/maintainers of women

The responsibility is a duty for both the rich and the poor within means, as demonstrated in Surat at-Talaq verse 7, which may be translated / interpreted in its most basic sense as:

Let the man of means spend according to his mean, and let the man whose resources are restricted spend according to what Allah has given him. Allah puts no burden on any person beyond what He has given him. After a difficulty, Allah will soon grant relief

Included in this is the meaning that a man must always meet his responsibilities in the support of his family - the poor man must spend in accordance with whatever he has been provided by God. At this point it is important to clarify such a notion of protection, as some of its connotations hold problematic meanings for women's agency. That is, the provision of protection as a duty for men does not mean that Islam views women as incapable or ineffective, rather that each woman has the right to support and care without being patronised or restrained.

Nafaqa is also extended to the divorced mother of a man's children, stated in the Quran in Surat al-Baqarah verse 233, which may be translated/interpreted in its most basic sense as:

Mothers shall suckle their offspring for two whole years if the father desires to complete the term. But he shall bear the cost of their food and clothing on equitable terms. No soul shall have a burden laid on it greater than it can bear. No mother shall be treated unfairly on account of her child. Nor a father on account of his child, and an heir shall be chargeable in the same way. If they both decide on weaning, by mutual consent, and after due consultation, there is no blame on them. If you decide on a foster-mother for your offspring, there is no blame on you, provided you pay her what you offered, on equitable terms. But fear Allah and know that Allah sees what you do

The importance of support is highlighted further in the ahadith. For example, Abu Dawud reported that the Prophet said in meaning, 'it is a sin for a man not to take charge of what has been given to him to take charge of'. Therefore a husband and father is duty bound in the religion to take charge of his familial responsibilities, a woman supported while remaining financially independent and able to earn through domestic and outside work, and own in her own right.

The married woman's duty is to honour the consensual sexual contract of marriage¹⁷¹ by making herself available sexually to her husband unless she is menstruating, ill or would be caused pain. This sexual responsibility of a wife to her husband is described in Surat al-Baqarah verse 223, which can be translated / interpreted in its most basic sense as:

your wives are as a tilth for you, so approach your tilth when or how you will; but do some good act for your souls beforehand and fear Allah

A wife's responsibility is also mentioned in relation to the mahr in Surat an-Nisa' verse 21 which can be translated / interpreted in its most basic sense as:

And how could you take it [e.g. the mahr] when you have gone to each other [al-lfda], and they [the woman] have taken from you a solemn covenant [in wa 'akhadhna minkoum mithaqan ghalidha, al-mithaqou l-ghalidh] ?

In this verse, al-lfda may be interpreted as referring to sexual relations, while in wa 'akhadhna minkoum mithaqan ghalidha, al-mithaqou l-ghalidh – the solemn covenant - refers to the legal contract of marriage by which the woman becomes his wife and therefore sexual partner. i.e. she is sexually available to him, while he honours and respects her. It is very important to note that her sexual duty is not an excuse for rape within marriage. A marriage contract is not a sale - barring all romantic and social realities of respect and love, in business terms the contract can be compared with a rental. A man does not own a woman's body, rather the woman's sexuality is recognised as a service in a situation requiring mutual respect¹⁷². Sex in Islam is not viewed as sinful or degrading, rather an important and pleasurable part of life, as recorded in the ahadith and discussed by many scholars.

¹⁷¹ Barlas, A. 2002:165 quoting Bouhdiba, A. translated by Sheridan, A. 1985:187

¹⁷² See Haeri, S. 1989

An Islamic feminism can draw upon these rights and duties while simultaneously promoting choice. The women in this study all asserted that women's emancipation is rooted in the rights afforded to them in Islam. For example, A., whose interest in different forms of feminism had been sparked by a university course on French feminist writings summarised the general view on the question of an Islamic feminism,

I find it ironic that one of the main things that gets dragged up over and over is Islam's treatment of women, as if 'Islam' is a nasty, wife-beating man. The fact is that Islam provides me with so many rights and when you talk with other women they feel exactly the same.

Participants in this context talked about their rights in Islam, and that it is this set of rights that acts as a feminist force. For example E. said,

You ask about feminism, well my rights are laid out in Islam and no one can argue with them. If I want to stay at home with the kids I can and am respected for it and if I want to work I can and am respected for it.

Asked more specifically about the rights they spoke about women repeatedly mentioned those outlined above: particularly with regards to a husband's duties towards his wife, the *mahr* and remuneration for house work. Unlike feminists such as Ahmed, who suggest that the Islamic marriage in particular is hierarchical¹⁷³, the participants viewed the contract as a source of empowerment. Z. was typical in her understanding:

I mean, how radical is that?! As a woman I can live in very different ways, a traditional homemaker or 'modern working women' and I get respect and pay that's all my own. My responsibilities are basically those I choose to take - I don't

¹⁷³ Ahmed, L. 1992:62

have to help around the house, I don't have to contribute to the family finance. It's empowering just knowing that theoretically, that's mine. Financially I wouldn't do that to J. [Z's husband] but it means I'm doing a good thing, not something that is automatically expected or demanded of me.

The rights were thus contextualised in a framework of choice, or potential choice. *R.* spoke of the diversity of Muslims to illustrate the point,

If we look at the Muslims round the world, it's obvious that Islam covers many different ways of behaving ... there are different cultures, expectations, ways of doing things that are all allowed, the halal stuff obviously. Women can live in the way that's appropriate to them.

This comment pinpoints a particularly important aspect of the rights women talked about: the inclusivity and breadth allowing for very different ways of living. The flexible Islamic framework thus allows a woman to live in the way she chooses. The theory is, as discussed by the participants, illustrated by the women mentioned in the Quran and those who stand as central figures in Islamic history: As *R.* told me,

Look at our great female figures in Islam - look at Khadija, Aiysha and Fatimah! Look at the female companions! These are women to aspire to.

Similarly, *Z.O.* reflected,

When you think of great examples of Muslim women, you think of the early sisters, the wives of the Prophet, or Fatimah, and Abu Bakr's daughter Asma. They were strong women! They're women we should try to be like... they remind everyone what women can be.

M. summarised such sentiments,

We don't need to imagine great possibilities for women in Islam, we only have to look at history. In previous eras we've had Maryam, the best of women, and women like Bilqees who was powerful but ultimately humble... these demonstrate the importance of women in the world. And in our own era there have been many different and great examples of Muslim womanhood, whether you think of Khadija, the first convert and wife of the Prophet... to Sumayyah [bint Khabbab], the first martyr.

Therefore, while great and diverse women in the Quran such as Maryam Umm ^Isa (Mary mother of Jesus), Bilqees the Queen of Sheba and Aasiyah wife of Pharaoh lived in previous eras under different religious laws¹⁷⁴ they remain profoundly inspirational figures, embedded in the histories and texts not only of Muslims but Jews and Christians too. It is however, the women in more recent Islamic history who are of particular interest to the context of Islamic feminism, as they are women who lived by the same framework of Islamic law as today. The following examples are brief and do not do justice to each individual, but the purpose is to demonstrate the breadth that exists under the all too often restricted banner 'Muslim woman'.

In economic terms, perhaps the most obvious choice to illustrate women's independent wealth and earnings is Khadija bint Khuwaylid. Khadija proposed to the Prophet pre-revelation and became his first wife, an elder, wealthy and independent businesswoman. Khadija is also highly esteemed with regard to the religious and spiritual, as the first person to convert to Islam after the Prophet received his first revelation. Similarly ^Aiysha bint Abu Bakr¹⁷⁵, one of the Prophet's wives whom he married after the death of Khadija, became a great source of religious knowledge, transmitting many hadith and giving religious judgments to the

¹⁷⁴ Muslims believe that all the Prophets and Messengers, such as Noah and Jesus came with the same monotheistic message, but with different laws to live by.

¹⁷⁵ Abu Bakr as-Siddiq was the first Caliph for the Sunni and close friend of the Prophet, known as 'the best of the Prophet's nation'.

community at large after the death of the Prophet. Her status was so high that people travelled long distances to take knowledge from her¹⁷⁶. Her interest in politics and her great influence in the affairs of the community are also famous¹⁷⁷. Fatimah¹⁷⁸, the Prophet and Khadija's only surviving child and wife of ^Ali ibn Abi Talib¹⁷⁹ is also held in great regard for her spirituality, teaching in religious matters¹⁸⁰ and her kindness and devotion to others. Nafisa¹⁸¹, great-granddaughter of Hassan, son of ^Ali and Fatimah¹⁸² is famed for her piety, spiritual devotion and wealth of knowledge that inspired male scholars such as Imam ash-Shaf[^]iiy¹⁸³. Many other women have also been noted as important scholars in the classical texts, praised for their minds and actions including ^Aiysha bint Sa[^]d bint ibn Abi Waqqas, Umrah bint AbdurRah[^]man, Umm Ad-Darda, ^Aisha bin Talha and Fatima bint Qays¹⁸⁴. This importance placed on knowledge is mentioned repeatedly in the Quran¹⁸⁵ and ahadith, contradicting notions of the ignorant Muslim woman¹⁸⁶.

The 'shrinking-violet' stereotype of the Muslim woman is shattered by such women. For example, 'Asma, sister of ^Aiysha and daughter of Abu Bakr is remembered in particular for risking her life taking food to the Prophet and her father during their escape from persecution in Mecca by the most powerful tribes¹⁸⁷. Other women, such as Nusaybah bint Ka[^]b¹⁸⁸, were famed for their fighting skills in battle as well as compassion for the wounded: Nusaybah took part and was maimed in many battles, including the Battle of Uhud,

¹⁷⁶ Afshar, H. 1998. 11; Bewley, A. 1999:8,9

¹⁷⁷ Abbott, N. 1985

¹⁷⁸ Roded, R. 1999:33

¹⁷⁹ ^Ali, the cousin of the Prophet and the first male convert was the fourth Sunni Caliph and first Imam of the Shia[^], known as the most knowledgeable of the Prophet's nation. This status is understood from a hadith - the Prophet said to Fatimah, in meaning, 'I have married you to the most knowledgeable person in my nation'.

¹⁸⁰ Afshar, H. 1998. 11

¹⁸¹ Afshar, H. 1996

¹⁸² Waddy, C. 1980: 100

¹⁸³ Bewley, A. 1999:12

¹⁸⁴ See for example, Bewley, A. 1999.

¹⁸⁵ For example in Surat al-Mujadilah, verse 11: *Allah raises the ranks of those among you who believe and acquire knowledge.*

¹⁸⁶ El-Nimr, R. 1996:92-93 in Yamani, M. 1996

¹⁸⁷ Waddy, C. 1980:22

¹⁸⁸ She was also known as Umm ^Umarah

fighting alongside the Prophet and stopping to tend the wounded, including her own son.

It is also interesting to note that these women are not known by the names of their husbands, even those who were married to the Prophet. This continuity in naming - a symbolic form of identity - is small but significant matter. Throughout the Muslim world a woman does not traditionally take the family name of her husband, defining herself through her parents, children, place of birth or chosen name as she chooses. For many feminists, the expectation of a woman to take her husband's name in Western cultures illustrates her subordination to him, that Islam does not require such a change highlights a woman's independent personhood¹⁸⁹.

The diverse lives and characters of these women demonstrate the flexibility in Islam with regards to the ways women choose to live their lives. Such strong women are an important reference point for feminists as their lives demonstrate that women can be exemplary Muslims *and* feminist role models, countering arguments that feminism is in opposition to Islam.

An Islamic feminism is thus rooted in foundational Islamic rights and an early tradition of those rights in practice. Women are protected and promoted within a framework that allows plurality vis-à-vis their lifestyle choices. It is through this combination of rights, role models and choice that the women taking part in this study felt empowered: for them, Islam *is* feminist, and the idea of an Islamic feminism either tautological or just blindingly obvious. When questioned what an Islamic feminism might look like, and what role it could play in the lives of women, participants mentioned a number of points on which this chapter will later expand.

First, it is helpful to contextualise the aforementioned ideas on which an Islamic feminism can be based with other feminisms. A key theoretical point that underpins the rights provided in the Quran and

¹⁸⁹ Bulbeck, C. 1998:10

Sunnah and the ideas mentioned by the women is a worldly model of gender difference, in which men and women are assigned certain gendered rights and roles alongside a spiritual sameness. That is, gender difference is not rejected in social organisation but, to a degree, actually highlighted.

Superficially, the concept of embracing or even accepting gender difference is contentious in the context of some forms of feminism, particularly those labelled as Liberal but also some Socialist feminists¹⁹⁰. The rejection of Islam as anti-woman is founded in the ignoring of meaning and context coupled with the assumption that all related structures are patriarchal: Muslim actions are read through an unrelated, usually secular Western set of perspectives¹⁹¹. This lack of context is also compounded through feminism having been framed by its most dominant discourses as a pursuit of gender equality rendered to mean 'sameness'. For an Islamic feminism, the singular pursuit of equality is irrelevant, and in the context of other feminisms is an equation that must be challenged, not only for its apparent oxymoronic characteristic - sameness by its nature negates a need for equality¹⁹² - but for its inverted complicity in reflecting patriarchal and culturally specific norms.

A large proportion of feminist activity has focussed on the idea that women should be equal to men in all spheres of sociality. Women have fought for recognition as equals to men in the legal systems of their societies¹⁹³, promoted individualism as a way of breaking the constraints of traditional 'feminine' roles¹⁹⁴ and promoted economic Marxism with the same aim¹⁹⁵: the approaches are rich in diversity, but all united in their quest for gender equality. In addition, this notion of equality has been harnessed to the idea that for women to achieve equality, gender must be eradicated altogether. That is, women are not only equal to men, but *without difference* to men, a

¹⁹⁰ Sargisson, L. 1997:273

¹⁹¹ Mohanty, C.T. 1997:268. in McClintock, A. Mufti A. & Shohat, S. 1997.

¹⁹² Minow, M. 1990a:51

¹⁹³ Belleau, M.C. 1996:254, 257

¹⁹⁴ Belleau, M.C. 1996:258

¹⁹⁵ Humm, M. 1989:55

possible solution to and confirmation of Simone de Beauvoir's concept that *on ne naît pas femme, on le devient*¹⁹⁶: women are not born but socially constructed and conditioned to behave in a certain way.

Such an argument is problematic on several accounts. As Radical feminists have argued, the equality as sameness model results in a struggle to take an equal portion of what the patriarchs have, to beat the men at their own game, to be like men. It reinforces the idea that women, as the outlaw sex, must commandeer the masculine to achieve emancipation.

The quest for sameness strengthens the idea of positive and negative, the notion that men are to be imitated and that to be female is shameful. It can also be argued that it reproduces the subtle and deeply embedded framework of patriarchy in the very societies feminists wish to reform. The power of patriarchy is not subverted by the blurring of boundaries i.e. female becoming male; rather the power becomes absolute. Such a model acts as a paradox, undermining the feminist cause rather than strengthening it¹⁹⁷. Similarly, the idea that gender roles should be eliminated sits uncomfortably with the intense gender consciousness that the model requires¹⁹⁸.

Despite arguments resisting the equality of sameness model, it is still viewed as a 'fact' rather than a perspective, embedded in popular feminism and the writings of many activists. Within such an environment, a proposal from an Islamic perspective that involves roles and rights based on gender difference may be understood as irreconcilable with feminism, particularly as it is rooted in a religion usually castigated by the same people as anti-feminist.

¹⁹⁶ de Beauvoir, S. 1949/1976: 13

¹⁹⁷ Mitchell, J. & Oakley, A. 1989:3; Sargisson, L. 1997:273

¹⁹⁸ Mirza, Q. 2002:108, 118

From the perspective of feminists promoting blanket sameness, it is clear why authors such as Moghissi¹⁹⁹ cannot accept Islam as a feminist alternative - Islam and feminisms become polarised and contradictory. It is precisely the differentiation between the sexes and the consequent designation of different rights to each sex in the more worldly aspects of life that is problematic to many feminists, not only in its assertion of gender difference, but in the rights and practices particular to each sex²⁰⁰. While some cultural Muslim practices throughout history have used this differentiation as a justification for male domination²⁰¹, the actual Islamic framework, as will be argued, is one of choice and complementarity²⁰².

Perhaps the inability to accept other perspectives and definitions of feminism demonstrates that certain feminisms have become 'blocked by the conceptual frameworks dominant in their culture'²⁰³. That is not to deny that all feminisms are part of and suited to the sociality in which they are articulated, but that the concepts that they advance are likely to change over time and situation. What may have been a useful tool in the destabilising of patriarchal ideas ingrained in society can become dominant and unquestioned itself - equality as gender sameness cannot be promoted as the sole answer to all women's struggles.

The gender sameness model is also problematic in relation to the internal debates of feminisms that link themselves to Islam. These feminisms have been dominated by Islam-Reformist feminists who generally belong to and/or are influenced by Western academia and whose ideas follow a gender sameness model. In this context, Mirza has warned that the void between different theories - those promoting gender sameness versus those promoting gender difference - could become uncrossable. Rather than thriving on tensions and debate, the situation could lead to stagnation and a disruption of theoretical exchange and support between Muslim

¹⁹⁹ Moghissi, H. 1999

²⁰⁰ Ridd, R. 1994:85, 87

²⁰¹ Afshar, H. 1998:3; Yamani, M. 1996: intro.

²⁰² Afshar, H. 1997

²⁰³ Harding, S. 2004:3 citing Rose & Rose 1976

based feminisms²⁰⁴. This danger of stagnation can be applied to feminism in general: a rejection of gender difference and those promoting it may stunt feminism's development, the fear that many have of post-modern heterogeneity realised in the very homogeneity that seems so comfortable.

The danger of excluding differences of opinion within feminism is illustrated by the feeling of some women that 'feminism' is 'not for' them²⁰⁵, or as discussed in Chapter 1, a term with which it is difficult to identify. For example, Khan relays the situation of Muslim women in Canada who 'are silenced, ignored and oppressed, not only by structures and institutions, but also by the very social movement whose legitimisation is largely derived from its opposition to oppression, namely feminism'²⁰⁶. Such exclusion is a failure of feminist activity and can be understood as symptomatic of the rejection of difference and an internalisation of dominant representations of the Other.

There is both legitimacy and value in feminism accepting gender difference. Implicit to Beauvoir and others' ideas is that the female/feminine is set against the positive norm of male/masculinity as a negative other²⁰⁷, has another significant element relevant to this discussion. The otherness of women in such a competitive and unequal setting is reflective of the otherness of minorities. The assimilation model, in which the minority is encouraged or coerced into becoming like the majority, is as disempowering as the attempt to assimilate female with male. The feminist reflection of this hegemony - the failure to recognize and accept difference - limits feminisms by ignoring the heterogeneity of women, Muslim or otherwise, and excludes many women from the feminist framework²⁰⁸. A similitude can be drawn with the concept of social cohesion where different groups and individuals in society are not expected to

²⁰⁴ Mirza, Q. 2002:120

²⁰⁵ Slaughter, A. 2002:168 in Brewer, M. 2002

²⁰⁶ Khan, S. 2000:17 quoting Abdo, N. 1993:74

²⁰⁷ Humm, M. 1989:17

²⁰⁸ Bebeau, M. C. 1996:252; Mirza, Q. 2002:120

become same, but unite in their differences as well as commonalities.

By promoting difference, hierarchical power may be lessened as competition is removed, choice is embraced, and conformity diminished. If the sexes are viewed less as a static dichotomy and the idea of choice is introduced, the possibility of women and men having equally valued roles, whatever they may or may not be, creates a true equality where power is destabilized.

The concept of difference as a positive characteristic has in fact existed throughout feminist history, particularly in the context of gender difference. Gender differences have been celebrated by Radicals, the cultural feminists of French psychoanalytic tradition, American object-relations theorists and maternal and eco-feminists'²⁰⁹. As an alternative to the equality of sameness model, some feminists have argued for feminism to embrace an equality of difference to allow feminisms to unite without homogenisation. As Sargisson posits:

By thinking about equality and difference in a non-oppositional way that is outside of the tradition of dualistic thought, we can begin to see that feminism might have a future that goes beyond fragmentation and dissolution.²¹⁰

However, this argument only furthers discussion and progress within certain boundaries, as it is rooted in the history of women in the West. That is, it is a Western context in which dominant feminists have created and built up their own frameworks and ideals and in which different concepts of equality have been debated. Islamic feminism is located outside this discourse, promoting a pre-constructed set of rights and duties i.e. those prescribed in classical Islam. In this vein, I would argue that the feminist alternative provided by Islam is one that simultaneously includes gender difference and sameness, a balance of power constructed through

²⁰⁹ Bulbeck, C. 1998:11

²¹⁰ Sargisson, L. 1997:274

the framework of rights and duties that can be viewed from a feminist perspective as legitimate and empowering.

Feminist authors with an Islam-reformist agenda such as Mernissi, have portrayed Islam as having created a battle of hatred between the sexes²¹¹. While such claims may be exaggerations of a real situation between some Muslim women and misogynists in their communities, it is a complete misinterpretation of Islam. Islam, as found throughout the Quran and Sunnah, refers to two spheres, the worldly and the spiritual.

These spheres are not dichotomous; rather the worldly exists inside the spiritual. In the worldly sphere, the concepts of 'man' and 'woman' may be recognised as social categories. Men and women are to an extent defined in relation to - not against - each other. They are assigned certain roles and rights described at the beginning of this chapter that can be integrated into an individual's way of life.

Enveloping the worldly, social aspect of life is the sphere of the spiritual within which gender sameness is asserted. Spiritually, social categories of *man* and *women* are replaced with *mu'mineen* and *mu'minaat* or *muslimeen* and *muslimaat*, male and female Muslims, whose sex is irrelevant and whose spiritual roles are the same, to achieve as higher status in piety as possible.

As Trinh argues, difference is not the same as apartheid or separatism, a term often used to describe the Islamic framework: such a 'concept of difference can encompass differences as well as similarities... Difference is not what makes conflicts. It is beyond and alongside conflict'²¹². Islamic feminism can thus draw strength from an eradication of gender and total individualism in the most important aspect of life according to Islam, the spiritual, while rooting itself in the rights and roles provided for worldly, daily living and the wider conditions of sociality: women's realities that need

²¹¹Mernissi. F. 1975:144

²¹² Trinh, T.M 1997: 416 in McClintock, A. Mufti, A. & Shohat, S. 1997

worldly, daily solutions. This is a feminism in which difference is positive, neither sex is otherised - on the contrary they are viewed as complementary²¹³ - and choice is honoured²¹⁴. It is a flexible model for women's changing lifestyles and life cycles²¹⁵. Whereas many feminisms have set about creating certain rights and ideals to aim for, such as equality, an Islamic feminism has a foundation and framework that is already accepted as sacred by huge numbers of men and women. Its aims can therefore involve an assertion of these rights.

The tensions generated between arguments for and against difference, sameness and equality take us back to the questions raised in Chapter 1, about what feminism is and what its aims are. Although the answers are often very different, they stem from the united position that socialities all over the world have an imbalance of power, in which the dominant laud over the otherised and dominated, included in which is the broad and non-homogenous category 'woman'.

Feminisms agree to differing extents that something must be done to redress the balance, and their focus starts with women. The Islamic feminist framework that has been described so far provides a solution that involves a recognition of both gender differences and similarities that are shared and rejected to different levels by other feminisms.

Despite the theoretical discomfort some Western feminisms may have with gendered rights, there are areas in which an Islamic feminism and other feminisms have consensus. The rights concerning a woman's independent wealth and inheritance are rights that early Western feminists struggled for and on which they founded their feminist ideas, and thus have been historically embedded in feminist struggles. An even more radical proposal is the Islamic right of remuneration for work in the home, whether that be cleaning,

²¹³ Afshar, H. 1997

²¹⁴ Afshar, H. 1996:197 in Yamani, M. 1996; Yamani, M. 1996: intro.

²¹⁵ Afshar, H. 1996:200 in Yamani, M. 1996

cooking or child rearing. This right, from a non-Islamic perspective, has been propounded most famously by Christine Delphy and her fellow campaigners in the collective 'Wages for Housework'²¹⁶.

Delphy founds her argument on the notion that the appropriation of labour in the home, whether by spouses, parents or in-laws, is a form of exploitation²¹⁷ that affects women in particular²¹⁸. To rebalance this inherent power, Delphy and others advocate remuneration for work done in or for the home.

This idea is often viewed as radical because it is contrary to ingrained norms within many societies that result in a deep-seated denial of the exploitation itself. The exploitation is masked by an unquestioned construction of familial relations, particularly between husband and wife. Perhaps due to the belief that marriage is a sacred bond, the 'traditional' role of women within marriage and the family is to work hard 'for love' and 'duty' i.e. for free.

In contrast, the Islamic right of remuneration is contextualised by a very different understanding of marriage. Although the Islamic marriage contract is viewed as an institution sanctioned by God, it is not considered sacred. A man and woman enter into what is essentially a consensual sexual contract having agreed on the terms and conditions that include the aforementioned foundational rights and roles. It is also understood that the contract may be dissolved at some point in the future i.e. divorce is not prohibited. This view of marriage has considerable advantages for feminist activism as the institution is clear cut, the weight of Islam allowing women to fight against culturally based exploitation and interpretations of religion.

'Tradition', a word frequently used as a euphemism for perceived 'religious' practices, is often given as a reason or excuse for the position of women in the organisation of the everyday. I would argue that these problems can be located in the aforementioned cultural practices and interpretations. It is clear from the rights assigned to

²¹⁶ Delphy, C. & Leonard, D. 1992:95

²¹⁷ Jackson, S. 1996:58

²¹⁸ Delphy, C. & Leonard, D. 1992:1

women in Islam that the roles and spheres of sociality that women can inhabit are not restricted to one side of the often-unquestioned 'public-private' / 'male-female' dichotomies²¹⁹. While fulfilling the roles of wife and mother is understood as an honoured position vital to the continued existence and welfare of society, they are certainly not the only options. Islam provides women with non-negotiable care with flexibility and autonomy, accommodating many different lifestyles. This is a commonality of a number of feminisms, whether within Islamic feminisms or between feminisms in general.

The Islamic rights pertaining to family life are a route to dismantling the contradictions that women are often made to feel in relation to the public/domestic dichotomy. The duality causes certain unnecessary tensions: women choosing to work outside the home often feel that they are or perceived to be neglecting household work, which is often viewed as a 'duty'. Other women stay at home and are undervalued for the long hours and hard work of 'domesticity'. The Islamic framework enables choice without guilt: a woman has the right not to suckle her children, cook and clean, and if she does, she has the right to ask for payment. If she wishes to work outside the home, she may. The point is that all these choices are valid. Single or married she is protected and supported while maintaining independence and choice.

In comparing and contrasting the foundational elements of Islamic feminisms with other feminisms, its general form is revealed. The duo-spherical understanding of gender informs the framework of rights that cover broad aspects of daily life: economics, familial relationships and spirituality. These are areas in which an imbalance of power is often found, and in which women often suffer. An Islamic feminism is defined as such by its assertion of rights within this framework. Thus, Islamic feminisms can be characterised by their conforming to an orthodox, and thus a broadly accepted framework. The boundary of 'Islamic' is not too narrow as to exclude activism that are not specifically related to Islam; rather the boundary exists

²¹⁹ Humm, M. 1989:85 quoting Gilligan, C. 1982

as a definition of the Islamic nature of the feminism. Other feminisms may share similar goals with an Islamic feminism and vice versa.

In addition, the feminist re-readings or rejections of certain Muslim laws may also be embraced by those, such as the participants in this thesis, who locate their feminism within classical Islam. For example, many activists are fighting pseudo-shariah such as the 'Hudood Ordinance' of Pakistan and the killing of 'adulterous' women in Nigeria - injustices developed by picking out certain elements of classical shariah and applying them out of all levels of context and without the nuances and contentions that Islam provides. On the other hand, feminists working within a classical framework may reject the ideas of feminists who seek to deduce laws contrary to those established by ijma[^] and that are applied correctly. Mir-Hosseini for example, like many of the other reformist feminists, calls for reinterpretation of the various bodies of Islamic law, which she views as patriarchal²²⁰. This wholesale notion of change, as discussed in Chapter 1, does not sit comfortably with those working from a classical perspective.

While these ideas may be theoretically interesting, it is important that they can be justified as necessary additions to feminist theory, and translated into forms of activism - facets of feminism which as Delphy asserts, are indispensable to each other²²¹. Therefore it is reasonable to ask why Islamic feminisms are needed and how they may be applied.

Perhaps obviously, a great strength of Islamic feminism is its appeal and weight within Muslim communities. The body of knowledge that Islamic feminists can access as evidence in their promotion of women's rights is strong, sourced directly from the Quran, ahadith, interpretations of fiqh and Islamic history. From these sources emerges a model of broad possibilities and roles that women can fight to assert using the strength of Islam to challenge the objections

²²⁰ Mir-Hosseini, Z. 1993, 1996

²²¹ Delphy, C. & Leonard, D. 1992:144

of their communities and societies. Thus a role of Islamic feminism lies in reasserting Islamic principles and rights to counteract misogynist practices that have developed in different places over the course of time. As A. explained,

The problem for many women is that their rights are theoretical, not a reality. I think an Islamic feminism is one that promotes these rights, and empowers women to claim these rights.

Rh. also reflected the notion that Islam is misinterpreted in terms of women's rights and used the word 'queens', a turn of phrase that was repeated throughout many of the conversations I had with participants.

It's very sad that in Islam we [women] are queens, yet we aren't all treated like that in our communities, across the world. Some men, and when I think about it, looking at the community here, women as well... seem to prefer to ignore and deny that they [women's rights] even exist, never mind encourage them.

R. echoed these sentiments,

*It's very clear - Muslim women need to claim their rights, the rights they are given in the *din*²²² that are proved by the lives of our great female examples. This is what Islamic feminism is.*

R. commented that women are using Islamic feminism to assert their rights and independence,

Of course I can't speak for every community, but I know loads of girls, especially ones who were born Muslim who're really into their Islam... and they're actively resisting certain things

²²² *Din* is an Arabic term used by Muslims to refer to Islam, meaning religion/faith/way of life

about their cultures that are un-Islamic, say like a marriage they don't want, or ideas about how women should behave, things like that. They win arguments with their families because they have the proofs from Islam.

In a wider setting, this activism is also illustrated by the contentions over hijab, as discussed in Chapter 6, where feminists are on the one hand challenging both the Islamophobic anti-hijab laws and rhetoric of some individuals, groups and states, and on the other, struggling against the legal and physical enforcement of hijab in other contexts.

Earlier in the chapter, the failure of some dominant feminisms to work in an inclusive way was criticised for adding to the domination of women from otherised categories and those not subscribing to typical Liberal or Radical models of feminism. Providing another perspective, an Islamic feminism increases the feminist plane. For example, for women who feel that 'Western' feminism is about 'dividing men from women... separating women from the family'²²³, a concern articulated by the women in this study as well as those who have participated in other studies²²⁴, an Islamic feminism offers an alternative. This is illustrated by *Sh.* who voiced her inability to identify with some feminisms and suggested that Islam had given her a satisfactory alternative. Her comments met with agreement by others in the group discussion:

The problem with the word 'feminism' is that it has come to mean, in the eyes of loads of people, man-hating and individualistic... Thatcherite I suppose... you know, 'trample on everything to get our rights'... When I think of the Islamic framework, the idea is to promote harmony and balance between men and women.

Similarly, *Zh.* stated,

²²³ Warnock-Ferneau, E. 1998:415

²²⁴ Bullock, K. 2003; Karam, A.M. 1998; Warnock-Ferneau, E. 1998.

When you talk to other Muslim women, the idea of feminism, as in 'women are better than men' type feminism, is seen as irrelevant, and Islam is seen as negating any such need. There's no need for that sort of feminism... and anyway, men and women shouldn't be enemies, surely that's just as bad as what we should be fighting against.

Zh. reiterates a conclusion made in the first chapter, that an assertion of female power or actions inducing a sense of emancipation for a woman do not automatically constitute a feminism. Feminism by definition seeks to redress social imbalance in its widest sense, without using domination to counteract injustice or being limited to a purely gendered discourse. Islamic feminisms are consistent with this assertion; the Islamic framework of rights and roles are part of a wider body of rights and norms for social justice and harmony promoted by Islam. This wider vision of social harmony was implied as a context for women's rights described by the participants, most specifically by A.:

Islam is a life guide that applies to the whole of society so when everyone knows their duties towards each other and their rights, the result should be a content and harmonised society... It's sad that people aren't applying the theory!

Islamic feminisms can also counteract the stereotypes of Muslim women that remain within certain feminist writings and the wider discourses on Islam that promote an Orientalist view of Muslim women as homogeneous, ahistorical and other²²⁵: a binary of powerless victims subject to an all-powerful patriarchy²²⁶ who must be discussed and represented by their liberated 'Western' sisters. The narratives that produce such fixed categories of 'The Muslim Woman'²²⁷ are also generated by those who may be described as complicit insiders.

²²⁵ Mohanty, C.T. 1997:263, 264 in McClintock, A. Mufti, A. & Shohat, S. 1997

²²⁶ Mohanty, C.T. 1997:271 in McClintock, A. Mufti, A. & Shohat, S. 1997

²²⁷ As explored in depth by Zayzafoon, L.B.Y. 2005

Complicit insiders are the individuals and groups who claim to speak about Islam and Muslim women from the inside yet, through fixed and reductionist constructions, confirm the negative perspectives of dominant discourses. These insiders include for example, some of the Islam Reformist feminists mentioned in the previous chapter, and on the other side of the same coin, religio-political groups promoting similarly singular and narrow interpretations of Islam and Muslims such as Hizb-ut-Tahrir. Neither group of narratives contribute positively to debate, instead adding to the stagnation and misrepresentations of dominant discourses. Orientalist and religio-political groups, alongside oppressive cultural discourses promote their singular world viewpoints and desire for stable identities by repressing difference and Muslim 'internal heterogeneity'²²⁸.

To counteract these narratives, Muslim women have the ability and tools to represent themselves in a pluralist manner and Islamic feminism is one of those tools²²⁹. In valuing diversity and the dynamic, complex nature of peoples' identities and needs, Islamic feminism challenges simplistic 'regulatory' images of 'Muslim'²³⁰ - whether the politicised clones promoted by Hizb-ut-Tahrir's vision of a united Ummah, the 'terrorists' of Western media-hype or the segregated victims of certain feminist discourses.

The addition²³¹ of Islamic feminisms to the feminist sisterhood increases the chances of feminist activism really working on the ground. Feminism's subversive, destabilising effect on power is an important tool that can be applied in different forms to the various and many contexts that women live. As discussed in Chapter 1, this counter-power is nullified if it excludes and /or homogenises the women it seeks to work for. By addressing the issues of women through a different framework, Islamic feminisms provide an alternative, and thus expand the arena so often criticised as exclusive, 'White', Western and anti-Islam²³².

²²⁸ Khan, S. 2000:130

²²⁹ See Mohanty, C.T. 1997:274. in McClintock, A. Mufti, A. & Shohat, S. 1997

²³⁰ Khan, S. 2000:127, 129, 130

²³¹ Mohanty, C.T. 1997:258, 259. in McClintock, A. Mufti, A. & Shohat, S. 1997

²³² Mohanty, C.T. 1997:255-275. in McClintock, A. Mufti, A. & Shohat, S. 1997.

Homogenisation is a divisive way of asserting power in a discourse of 'them versus us'²³³ and for homogenised groups, such as women and Muslims²³⁴, the feminist discourse should be a way of reclaiming or neutralising the effect of power, rather than acting to buttress it. The assumption that 'woman' or 'Muslim women' or any other category is coherent or can be essentialised, does not stand up to scrutiny.

Similarly, to negate the existence of 'woman' completely is unhelpful²³⁵. As such, the Islamic perspective defines a broad category of 'woman' within which women, as the multiplicity of individuals, live their lives. An Islamic feminism, whether one constructed to address a culturally or geographically specific problem, or one that seeks to promote the situation of a broader group of people, is thus a legitimate and valuable addition to the feminist cause and its continuing recognition of women's diverse choices²³⁶.

²³³ Anissa, H. 2000:31

²³⁴ Kabbani, R. 1986; El Guindi, F. 1999; Naghibi, N. 1999; Shirazi, F. 2001; Jawad, H. & Benn, T. 2003

²³⁵ Maynard, M. 1995:275

²³⁶ Delphy, C. 2004; Ong, A. 1988:90

Chapter 3: Methodologies

The exploration of Islamic feminisms in this study is centred upon the experiences and ideas of 'white' British women who have chosen to become Muslim. My interest at the beginning of the research was deliberately broad: to find out how these Muslim women who come from a Western background live as Muslims and women in Britain, and their ideas about feminism and Islam. Through the analysis of this research, broad themes came to the surface that formed the focus of the next three chapters: conversion, identity and hijab.

All three chapters contribute to the analyses of the participants' ideas and experiences in relation to the multiplicity of identities and the politics to which they relate, the struggle against regulatory discourses, and the chasm between these and the lived realities through which women subvert domination. These ideas are themselves embedded in the notion of Islamic feminisms as theory and activism. A number of themes run throughout, in particular the notion of power. Power, emanating from the concepts and articulation of knowledge, cultural discourses, legal, socio-psychological and even physical, affect everyone taking part in this study and also the research itself. As discussed in this chapter, power dynamics saturate research, in the relations between the participants, the researcher and the reader. In the three chapters following, power is understood and analysed in a broader sense, in its use by regulatory discourses and the people who peddle them, which individuals resist through their assertion of identity and daily living.

Intertwined with the understandings of power is the concept of agency - while individuals may assert their agency to a high degree as discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, they are also constrained by their own situations and social contexts. We do not choose how others interact with us and can only deal with the situations in which we find ourselves with the resources we have at that particular moment.

Thus each person is involved in the interplay between herself as an independent agent and the constraining world around her²³⁷.

Ultimately, the thesis explores all these ideas and activities with a constant acknowledgement of the complexity and negotiation that permeate them. This is why the balance between total post-modern fragmentation and a recognition of diversity and multiplicity is so keenly discussed and maintained as an aim throughout.

The purpose of this chapter is to explain the process that allowed the study to develop from the original broad aims to the final analysis, asking how the research was carried out and why these methods were chosen. The process can be broken down into four sections. The first section focuses on the broad theories and ethics underpinning the chosen methods i.e. the overall methodological perspective of gathering research in the field, analysing and writing²³⁸. The second explains how certain methods fulfilled the theoretical aims and practical requirements of the research, describing these methods in practice²³⁹ including the successes, problems and solutions. The third section describes the process of writing, and the fourth discusses the analytical theory that has been applied.

As indicated in the introduction and Chapter 1, the feminist aims of this thesis should not be limited to the subject matter but also infuse the ways in which the research is gathered, analysed and written. Writers have often argued that there are no specific 'feminist methodologies' i.e. standardised theories of research, rather feminists choose the approaches to research that suit their diverse perspectives and satisfy their objectives²⁴⁰.

²³⁷ As Marx famously stated in the opening paragraph of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852): *Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.* See De Leon, D. 1913

²³⁸ See Harding, S. 1987:2,3

²³⁹ Maynard, M. 1994:16

²⁴⁰ DeVault, M.L 1996; Reinharz, S.1992:241

Similarly, these methodologies do not espouse one particular method for carrying out research: the unifying thread is the commitment to producing feminist knowledge *and* feminist activism²⁴¹. Thus, the feminist aspect of the research is rooted in the 'motives, concerns and knowledge' that permeate the process²⁴²: it is not enough for a study to be written by a woman or about women, it must be in some way *for* women. To clarify, woman / women here refers to some women, and not an essentialised, homogenous group. Diversity, a post-modern ideal, is applicable at a number of levels, in the theoretical constructions of different feminisms, the recognition of the diversity of feminists and women in general, and in the inclusion of diverse or varied²⁴³ participants involved in this study.

There are feminist methodological criteria drawn from various theoretical traditions, with which this thesis is intended to comply, that are appropriate to the nature of the project itself and my own feminist stance. At a basic level one such objective corresponds to Lugones & Spelman's notion that feminist theory should be 'based on, or anyway touch base with, the variety of real life stories women provide about themselves'²⁴⁴. In line with this idea, the research undertaken is concerned with linking the variety of theories on Islam and feminism with participants' theories and the way these are situated in their lives. The research methods and subsequent analyses therefore aim to record the women's own words/communications and consider them in a non-deconstructionist manner, a choice that will be further explained.

Another broad criterion is that the methods used and subsequent analyses should be open in all aspects. That is, the research involves me as a researcher and writer and as such my subjectivities should be evident in order to dilute power rather than obscure it through an invisible pseudo-objective authority. This post-modern

²⁴¹ de Groot, J. & Maynard, M. 1993:160; DeVault, M.L 1996:34; Maynard, M. 1994:11; Reinhartz, S.1992:251

²⁴² Brayton, J. 1997

²⁴³ de Groot, J. & Maynard, M. 1993:151, 152, 166

²⁴⁴ Brayton, J. 1997 quoting Lugones, M.C. and Spelman, E.V. 1990:21

ideal also encompasses a feminist embracing of the woman as researcher per se.

This effort to minimize power²⁴⁵ is twofold: the research should attempt to address the problems of power/dominance in society through the aforementioned increase in feminist knowledge and activist possibilities; and also within, in the relationships between myself and participants²⁴⁶, and myself and readers. For example, the concept behind using the word 'participant' is the effort to neutralize social research's historical frame of subject/object researcher/researched. Methodology is at the centre of these ideals, from the way in which relations between the women as participants and myself as a researcher are approached, to the explicit recognition of subjectivities and limitations.

It is also important to avoid portraying the ideas explored in the study as definitive or the participants and their lives as homogenous representatives. A thesis is a snapshot²⁴⁷: an exploration of ideas, opinions and analysis from the people involved. As a piece of qualitative research it conveys possibilities through its representation of the diversity of different concepts and lives rather than claim to be a pan-feminist, pan-Islamic representation.

In order to fulfil these principles and access women's ideas and ways of living feminism and Islam, certain qualitative methods were used. From the feminist, post-structuralist and post-modernist goal of explicit, power-reduced work came the refinement of collecting and representing the oral histories and testimonies²⁴⁸ of participants, a method applicable to many topics of research²⁴⁹. By using women's actual words in context, such methodology can assist in providing channels of communication, or 'a voice'²⁵⁰ to previously

²⁴⁵ DeVault, M.L 1996:33; Reinharz, S.1992 (website)

²⁴⁶ de Groot, J. & Maynard, M. 1993:159

²⁴⁷ Without I hope, the otherising and one-way viewpoint that bell hooks describes. hooks, b. 1999 in Hesse-Biber, S. Gilmartin, C. & Lydenberg, R. 1999:185

²⁴⁸ DeVault, M.L 1996:32

²⁴⁹ Reinharz, S. 1992:18, 21

²⁵⁰ DeVault, M.L. 1999:32, 33

voiceless²⁵¹ and/or mistranslated women²⁵² and are, in the words of Anderson and Jack, 'particularly valuable for uncovering women's perspectives'²⁵³. Thus, conversational, loosely structured interviews²⁵⁴ and focus groups were chosen as the most suitable methods for gathering research relevant to this thesis in contrast to other feminist approaches such as oral history/life stories, which would have resulted in data too broad for this context²⁵⁵.

Part of the attraction for feminists using these methods is the production of reciprocal relationships with participants²⁵⁶, conversational interviews allowing for in depth, one-to-one interaction between the two parties²⁵⁷. This is advantageous as it allows the participant to speak without inhibition from a group or public situation in as natural a situation as possible, with the exception of long-term participant observation/friendship. However, the interviewer must be aware of the impact power relations have on an interview, if it is the interviewer or interviewee who is dominant or if the relations are constantly negotiated and fluid. It is important from a feminist perspective that expectations, agendas and biases of a researcher are minimised as far as possible, as the words of participants and how these words are communicated in the field are the reality under research, not the ideals and reality of the researcher²⁵⁸. The choice of conversational interviews as the prime method for this study is explained by Reinharz, who describes open-ended interviews as allowing both the exploration of people's 'views of reality' and the generation of theory²⁵⁹, a two-fold feminist aspiration.

²⁵¹ Armitage, S. Hart, P. & Weathermon, K. quoting Berger Gluck S. 2002:3, Yung, J. 2002:87

²⁵² Behar, R. 1994

²⁵³ Anderson, K. & Jack D.C. 1991:11 in Gluck, S.B. & Patai, D. 1991

²⁵⁴ Oakley, A. 2000 & 1981 in Roberts, H. 1981.

²⁵⁵ Miller, R.L. 2000:2

²⁵⁶ Bloom, L.R. 1997:111 also citing Fonow, M.M. & Cook, J.A. 1991; Geiger, S. 1990; Harding, S. 1987; Heilbrun, C. 1988; Reinharz 1983; Roberts. 1981

²⁵⁷ DeVault, M.L 1996:37; Litoselliti, L. 2003:2

²⁵⁸ Gluck, S.B. & Patai, D. 1991:12; Reinharz, S. 1992

²⁵⁹ Reinharz, S. 1992:18

Focus groups are useful in generating a discussion within a group, in which a researcher can observe the interplay of diverse perspectives on a subject. For a participant, the situation will affect the dialogue: whether it is between strangers or friends, in a group in which hierarchy exists, and whether a person is more comfortable or productive talking to a group or one-to-one. For example, a group may already exist 'naturally' as a circle of friends or colleagues, or may be brought together from diverse contexts by the researcher purely for research purposes²⁶⁰. Problematically, these groups can be manipulated into consensus or views inhibited by dominant personalities²⁶¹: a successful focus group involves individuals who are comfortable in the environment and with the subject under discussion in order to avoid such scenarios as much as possible. If an effort to combat problems is not made, the research is devalued²⁶². However, an advantage of the focus group environment is that it allows the moderator / researcher to observe more than an interview allows for, as participants are involved in questioning and negotiating with each other²⁶³ while disagreements and diversity are made explicit.

The place in which the interviews and focus groups are held is also an important research factor, as the situation influences the ways in which relationships, dialogues and identities are generated at any one moment²⁶⁴. In the display and analyses of the research these constantly shifting dynamics must always be made explicit and taken into consideration²⁶⁵. With this in mind, all interviews took place either in a participant's house or neutral venue such as a café.

To succeed in making the methodology feminist, it was vital that trust-based, friendly relationships between the women who participated and the researcher were formed. As this study focuses on particular questions/themes rather than life history or storytelling

²⁶⁰ Bloor, M. Frankland, J. Thomas, M. & Robson, K. 2001:35

²⁶¹ Litoselliti, L. 2003:21

²⁶² Litoselliti, L. 2003:2

²⁶³ Litoselliti, L. 2003:3

²⁶⁴ Bloor, M. Frankland, J. Thomas, M. & Robson, K. 2001:37; Chih Hoong Sin. 2003

²⁶⁵ Chih Hoong Sin 2003:305

in general, the testimony was generated through informal interviews and focus groups, where to some extent, I instigated the subject of conversation. However, beyond attempting to incorporate research questions into the interviews/conversations the speaker was left to take lead and talk without interruption. My early attempts to write questions down and follow a structure of sorts failed as each interview took on a form of its own and each woman or group of women focussed on their own interests. This freestyle approach was kept in hand by my prompts but was successful in its dispersal of power and location of themes relevant to the thesis that I had not previously thought about.

Certain problems can arise from using such methods, for example there is a danger that the researcher voices her own opinions during conversations or that people keen to help say what they think a researcher wants to hear. It is also possible that individuals give different perspectives according to who else is listening. With this in mind, the methodology described above was very helpful and conversations/interviews were initiated in which I contributed as little as possible, asking the questions relevant to the project without interrupting or forcing the dialogue to fit rigidly to my own agenda. I encouraged as much monologue from participants as possible, through quietly facilitating by non-verbal communication rather than leading conversations.

In order to accurately record data, a small digital Dictaphone in conjunction with note taking was used, to document the spoken, the unspoken, the context and the dynamics of the interaction²⁶⁶. The recording was kept as discrete as possible: as early as possible during a meeting with a participant I asked permission to record and continued casual conversation. This was done in the hope that we would both or all forget about the 'extra set of ears' in the room - as Dictaphones are often felt to be - and allow the situation to become as natural as possible. Similarly, the notes I took on paper were kept

²⁶⁶ Anderson, K. & Jack D.C. 1991:12 in Gluck, S.B. & Patai, D. (ed.s) 1991; Bloor, M. Frankland, J. Thomas, M. & Robson, K. 2001:42; Litoselliti, L. 2003:49; Sangster, J.1994:7

as brief as possible, writing for example when a participant stopped for a drink, or paused in some other way. This method felt less interrogational than writing copious notes as a woman spoke. However, it should be noted that the recordings will have inevitably interrupted or affected in some way the 'dynamics of the interaction'²⁶⁷.

An interesting aspect to the research was working with 'white', British, Muslim, converts as someone who also self-identifies with these labels. As will be further discussed, the shared facets of identity affected a number of methodological issues, from the initial contacting of participants, our interactions, my analysis of the research and my understanding of their own analyses.

As a Muslim, particularly one shares specific facets of identity, the women were accessible to me through a network of Muslim communities and individuals in Britain. Contact was made through friends and by a snowballing method: email proved particularly successful. The initial email, asking for female converts to contact me if they were interested in participating in research, the subject of which was not mentioned, was sent to a number of organisations run by or for converts to Islam and to friends and acquaintances in the Muslim community who I thought may be able to help. As a result, over the period of approximately one month (although a few women emailed some months later) thirty-two individuals contacted me, usually providing brief details of their background and conversion, to volunteer for one-to-one interviews or to arrange focus groups involving their own friends and acquaintances. The subsequent process of contact and meetings in which I travelled to wherever a participant had suggested, resulted in successful interviews and focus groups with eighteen women, three of whom were already known to me. I felt that this number of participants, who were keen to participate and discuss their ideas, was enough to explore the positions of individuals from diverse backgrounds and achieve rich

²⁶⁷ Kulick, D. 1998:16

qualitative data, but small enough to achieve meaningful analysis in the limited time given for PhD research

There were a number of reasons why the women who had shown interest did not become involved in the actual research, such as meetings getting delayed and eventually cancelled; volunteering towards the end of the research period when I felt there was enough data for the size of the project; and in a few cases when initial meetings / interviews ended up being a general chat over tea rather than an interview yielding research material. These women did not wish to participate and were not explicit in their reasons, although one woman told me that she was having personal problems. It is not particularly useful to speculate, but it may be that they felt uncomfortable with the research process or me, or perhaps did not wish to discuss their ideas and experiences in such a candid way.

Success was defined by participants talking in-depth on subjects that were related to my broad research theme. It had been my aim before starting fieldwork to ensure that the women interviewed were diverse in terms of age, education and social background. In doing so, I had interviewed several non-‘white’ participants whose contribution was just as important to the process. However, it became clear that I would have to limit the diversity of participants in terms of ethnicity: the research was narrowed to ‘white’ converts in order to keep the scope manageable and explore the issues surrounding women converting to Islam from a position of dominance in society. I was fortunate that the women who came forward as participants were from diverse backgrounds and ages, perhaps reflecting the larger convert demographic. This meant that it was not necessary to engage in the problematic process of ‘choosing’ participants - they chose me.

I wanted to give a sense of the women as individuals, to provide a sense of their selves in order to contextualise their words. At the same time, although a number felt that there was no need for anonymity, I feel a duty towards protecting their privacy. I have therefore tried to negotiate a compromise, by anonymising their

names and providing brief biographies (see Appendix 1) that are separate to the following table of their social circumstances. It is hoped that they will be unidentifiable yet represented. At this point it is perhaps useful to state my own brief background in the context of this study: having met Muslims at college in Birmingham and university in St Andrews, I decided to learn about Islam, which I consequently embraced tacitly at the age of 18 and then fully at the age of 21.

AGE RANGE	15-25 yrs 33.3	26-35 yrs 50	36-45 yrs 22.2	
CONVERSION AGE	15-25 yrs 66.7	26-35 yrs 33.3	36-45 yrs 0	
EDUCATION	SCHOOL 11.1	COLLEGE 27.8	UNIVERSITY 55.6	P-GRAD 5.6
COMMUNITY SIZE: CONURBATION / TOWN	C. 61.1	T. 38.9		
FAMILY / HOUSEHOLD CIRCUMSTANCE	SINGLE 27.8	S+ CHILD 5.6	MARRIED 39	M+CHILD 27.8
WORK	F.T OUT. H 44.4	F.T IN H 27.8	PART-TIME 11.1	STUDENT 16.7

Table 2: Commonalities & Variations of Participant Backgrounds (%)

The table shows certain patterns – the average participant could be described as a young, educated and articulate urbanite who works fulltime outside the home. However, to generalise is also to reduce - there are also participants who are young, articulate, less formally educated and who work full time at home in much smaller communities. As previously discussed, participant diversity was necessary to gain deeper insight, and in terms of the demographic of converts was an important element to reflect. There is no definitive set of statistics with regards to conversion to Islam, although the

figure suggested by Birt stands at over 14 000 individuals²⁶⁸, which may be conservative in the context of the 2001 census results in which Muslims defining themselves as of 'white' British origin - a number of whom may be converts - numbered 64 000²⁶⁹.

It is important to note however, that neither the participants nor myself claim to represent converts or Muslims on general, nor are 'typical': it is clear that there is no archetypal convert just as there is no archetypal Muslim. Rather, we are a group of women who have converted to Islam, share facets of identity and have an interest in this study. In the context of the research, our identities as 'white' British converts to Islam are focused upon. In this way we have all chosen to be categorised in this way i.e. have self identified, although we may also be ascribed by others with the label. As discussed in Chapter 5, the way an individual positions her identities reflects a single moment of being and the role and situation in which she is acting. Thus, the women participating in this research, including myself, highlighted our feminist/Muslim/British/female selves as part of the process - during the interactions of meeting, discussing and analysing.

Before the interviews, participants only knew that the general theme of the research was to be their ideas and experiences of Islam as 'white'- British women who had converted to Islam. It was hoped that minimum information about the study would allow them to express their own ideas spontaneously with minimum influence from me or others they may have discussed such subjects with or having had long lengths of time in which to pre-prepare. In exchanges previous to meeting, the women were aware that I was a female researcher, and from the wording of emails which included the standard Muslim address *As-Salaamu ^alaisykum*, in conjunction with my name - a 'typically convert' combination of English and Arabic - all quickly concluded and confirmed that I was also a convert to Islam.

²⁶⁸ Birt, Y. quoted in *The Sunday Times*, February 22, 2004:5

²⁶⁹ www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=957

www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=954

This 'insider' status carried a number of advantages and disadvantages. We were all 'white' British female converts and there were a number of participants with whom I also shared similar family, class and educational backgrounds. In the case of three participants I was an insider in the personal sense of friend or family. Sharing labels with participants in terms of religion, gender, ethnicity and nationality in addition to a shared notion of sisterhood seemed to facilitate the building of trust between us²⁷⁰, the power reduced through a sense of affiliation²⁷¹.

Similarly, an insider is more likely to have 'a stronger understanding of the dynamics and play of social relationships' in the research situation: the contexts, phraseology, the subtleties of meaning, the nudges and winks, are all more likely to be understood²⁷². This theory was confirmed in my experience, as the interactions with all the women were, on a social level, very smooth. Shared cultural and religious norms facilitated the meetings in that neither party was likely to make a 'faux-pas' or do something that the other would find uncomfortable, from the way we greeted each other, removed shoes on entering a house or interacted with members of the participants' families such as husbands or mother-in-laws. This meant that by the time the actual interviews and focus groups started, the situation felt relaxed, and hopefully allowed the women to express their ideas more freely, and me to concentrate on good practice rather than worrying about my social behaviour.

However, the positive elements of having insider status are accompanied by problematic elements. Throughout the research, when talking with participants and when analysing their words it was important to be aware of and resist my own assumptions born from similar or shared experiences. In the same way I also had to be aware of the assumptions participants may have made about me, remembering that they could omit certain ideas or experiences

²⁷⁰ Kulick, D. 1998:16 for a discussion on 'insider' status.

²⁷¹ Brayton, J. 1997 (w.s) citing Matsumoto, V. 1996:165

²⁷² Matsumoto, V. 1996:165 in Brayton, J. 1997 (w.s); Wolf, D. L. 1996:15

believing that as an insider, such things would already be apparent to me²⁷³.

However, I was not only an insider - despite varying levels of shared identities and experiences, like any other stranger I still remained a relative outsider to the majority: a barely known researcher or interested guest. This researcher status was described by Evans as the 'knowable stranger'²⁷⁴ and can be viewed as carrying its own advantages.

An insider status does not guarantee friendships, or even the early sparks of 'hitting it off'. Even if a researcher achieves what some feminist researchers have viewed as an ideal²⁷⁵, the dynamics of friendship are not necessarily helpful - as the personal becomes involved, the freedoms of candid anonymity facilitated by a researcher's outsider status²⁷⁶ are eroded.

As it transpired, with the exception of the three women I already knew, the research time available did not allow for the development of long term relationships before or during the interview process as has been suggested by authors such as Reinharz and others, although I did not develop any hostile relationships as discussed by authors such as Bloom²⁷⁷. As has been mentioned in the biography section, some of the interactions with participants were short, meeting for the first and last time for one interview. In the case of others, a number of meetings occurred over several weeks. Each meeting was a multifaceted interaction in which to different degrees we got on and communicated, factors whose impact cannot be measured accurately. To contextualise the overall situation, having completed the process I continue to keep in contact as friends or sisters in Islam with seven of the women I did not previously know.

²⁷³ Yung, J. 2002 in Armitage, S. Hart, P. & Weathermon, K. 2002:88

²⁷⁴ Reinharz, S. 1992:27 citing Evans, S. 1979

²⁷⁵ Reinharz, S. 1983; Bloom, L.R. 1997:114

²⁷⁶ Wolf, D. L. 1996:15

²⁷⁷ Reinharz, S. 1983; Bloom, L.R. 1997:114

Although impossible to actually quantify, the tension inherent in an insider/outsider status must inevitably influence participant-researcher interactions. In evaluating the impact, I would argue that as an insider the advantage of shared experiences and knowledge outweighed the potential problem of assumption, while my outsider status allowed a degree of anonymity in which participants could speak candidly. With the foresight provided by the writings of feminist methodologists, the strategies discussed in this chapter allowed problems to a degree to be pre-empted, or overcome / reduced during and after the research.

However, the insider/outsider question is not isolated within this, or any other specific piece of research: it is deeply implicated in the debates of post-colonial discourses. The insider/outsider or 'halfie'²⁷⁸ is situated somewhere between the oppositions, unable to satisfy either category²⁷⁹. Researching from the inside of a minority is, to differing extents, to inform and thus strengthen the dominant discourse of otherisation, to become the glorified complicit insider²⁸⁰. It is to become an outsider, a researcher, a person with objective aims and ideals who is attempting to distance herself from her subjectivities. Yet the element of insider prevents her from becoming the objective researcher of dominant ideals - she is a perpetrator of subjectivities²⁸¹. While it is important to acknowledge this situation, it can also be viewed as a positive status in the feminist subversion of power. Power is created through and resides within the construction of binaries: the ambivalent status of the insider/outsider challenges the normative structure with its multi-layered perspective. Ultimately, the simplistic dichotomy of insider-outsider is unhelpful: the point is for all researchers to exert themselves in the hearing, understanding and accurate interpreting of women's words. The challenge therefore resided in remaining a researcher, rather than responding on purely personal or emotional levels of either empathy or disagreement with the ideas and experiences of the participants.

²⁷⁸ Abu Lughod, L. in Fox, R.G. 1991: 137

²⁷⁹ Lal, J. 1996:193 in Wolf, D.L. 1996; Trinh, T. M. 1997:417-418

²⁸⁰ Naples, N. 2003:49; Rastegar, M. 2005. (pre-publishing):1,2,3; Spivak, G.C. 1988 & 1990; Trinh, T.M. 1997:417

²⁸¹ Trinh, T. M. 1997:417-418

As discussed, the researcher is not afforded a bubble of objectivity, but it is a duty to the study and all involved to analyse rigorously and with integrity.

In addition, the problematic complicity in the dominant discourses of otherisation can be counteracted by explicitly accepting that this thesis is not intended to represent a homogenous group of women or to speak on 'their' behalf²⁸². The debates surrounding the politics of representation challenge the researcher to acknowledge her position: I am presenting and analysing the words of a number of women who volunteered their ideas, opinions and stories within the framework of my own thesis that is itself an amalgam of my own and others' ideas, opinions and stories. To reiterate, the intention is not to construct a definitive study or representation but to continue feminist dialogue regarding feminism itself and the women whom it may serve. This project not only involves the participants and myself but, it is hoped, a variety of readers who will join the process through their reactions and ideas²⁸³.

A vital aspect of feminist methodology is the way in which research is written: in breaking away from the colonial, racist roots of social research, not only have the physical methodologies been challenged, but so also has the writing process²⁸⁴, where researcher, participants and readers interact as a whole. Feminist and post-structuralist writing takes into account two interrelated principles that inform methodology and which are important to this thesis: subjectivity²⁸⁵ and reflexivity²⁸⁶.

The initial reaction to the idea that social research could no longer pretend to be objective was to accuse writers, such as those involved in the *Writing Culture* debate²⁸⁷ as being relativist and thus trying to destroy social research with a post-modern notion of

²⁸² Rastegar, M. 2005. (pre-publishing):6, 8

²⁸³ Abu Lughod 1993: 37; Rastegar, M. 2005:6; Taylor, S. J. 1984:313; 315; 329 in Bryman, A. & Burgess. R.G. 1984 part IV

²⁸⁴ Discussion by Trouillot, M.R. in Fox, R.G. 1991:40

²⁸⁵ Clifford and Marcus 1986: especially introduction; chpt.2

²⁸⁶ Harding, S. 1987; de Groot, J. & Maynard, M. 1993:4

²⁸⁷ Clifford, J. and Marcus, G.E. 1986

'incommensurable worldviews and rationalities'²⁸⁸. In reality, the idea that research was inevitably subjective was counterbalanced by a commitment to reflexivity and openness whereby the problematic nature of research was acknowledged and strategies to overcome problems constructed.

Feminist researchers have taken a leading role in this research revolution, acknowledging the politics of representation²⁸⁹ and explicitly including their own voices, agendas and backgrounds alongside those of the actors taking part in the study²⁹⁰. A specifically feminist answer to methodology was the emergence and development of standpoint theory²⁹¹. The theory challenges the myth of neutrality through the author declaring, through a process of reflexivity²⁹², her standpoint: where her knowledge and imagination is situated i.e. her individual social perspective, that of the women whom she is writing for and about and the interaction between these²⁹³. The process of complicating and challenging accepted ways of writing and depicting women's lives is an important aspect of standpoint's contribution to the feminist destabilizing of power structures²⁹⁴.

The attitude that writing is just part of the process bridging fieldwork and theory, to be taken for granted as an unquestionable, unbiased tool of communication has, because of these debates, become unacceptable. Foucault, who pointed out the linguistic and philosophical link between the words 'authorship' and 'authority', described the power relations involved through the very act of describing someone or something. We cannot escape the fact that 'writing is a political act'²⁹⁵. The writing of research is a 'product'²⁹⁶,

²⁸⁸ Overing, J. 1985:1

²⁸⁹ Lal, J. 1999 in Hesse-Biber, S. Gilmartin, C. & Lydenberg, R. 1999:116

²⁹⁰ Abu Lughod, L. 1993:29

²⁹¹ Harding, S. 1987:84, 157 and 2004:21, 35, 67; Hartsock, N.C.M. 1999; Ramazanoğlu, C. & Holland, J. 2002:103; Stoetzler, M. & Yuval-Davis, N. 2002; Hirschmann, N.J. 2004:317

²⁹² Naples, N. 2003:37 citing Richardson, L. 1990; Naples, N. 2003:19,37

²⁹³ Harding, S. 2004:6,7; Naples, N. 2003:198; Wolf, D.L. 1996:13

²⁹⁴ Harding, S. 2004:13

²⁹⁵ Benson, P. 1993: 6

²⁹⁶ Marcus, G. & Cushman, D. 1982: 25

generated as part of the research process. Thus, feminist researchers attempt to counteract the power inherent in the portrayal of the 'objective' writer's omniscient knowledge and silence. This is at the very heart of feminist research, which not only counteracts its own power, but exposes and resists the power-play of dominant discourses, acknowledging that the participants, writers and those written about, are to some degree reproductions of subject/object²⁹⁷.

A writer can never divorce herself from her writing - we all carry baggage from our experiences and our character, and this has an impact on the way in which research is gathered and written²⁹⁸. The challenge is to represent, in a way 'translate'²⁹⁹, the subject at hand accurately within time, space history and acknowledged authorial context, and this requires a writer to take control of the writing process³⁰⁰. Authorship carries a responsibility and power that can never be removed; rather it is a 'burden'³⁰¹ that may be tamed through explicit self-analysis and declaration of intention.

Authors who have embraced this challenge include Behar³⁰² and Gorkin³⁰³, who both use 'fiction style' in order to tell their own story as well as that of the women involved in their work. In this way, life stories and testimony are used to give all the women involved a voice, levelling the plain between author and authored. Other authors such as Abu Lughod³⁰⁴ have chosen to present the research through participants' own narratives while keeping their own words explicit but not forefront in order to remain researcher rather than researched. It is this methodology that has been followed here: the actual words of the women have been recorded, without interference or 'correction'³⁰⁵. These words are then contextualised so that the

²⁹⁷ Lal, J. 1999 in Hesse-Biber, S. Gilmartin, C. & Lydenberg, R. 1999:124

²⁹⁸ Leach, E. 1989:139; Benson 1993:2

²⁹⁹ See Borland, K. 1991 in Gluck & Patai. 1991:63

³⁰⁰ Geertz, C. 1988: 5, 8

³⁰¹ Rabinow, P. 1991

³⁰² Behar, R. 1994

³⁰³ Gorkin, M. Pineda, M. Leal, G. 2000

³⁰⁴ Abu Lughod, L. 1993:29, 30, 31

³⁰⁵ Reinharz, S. 1992:39

women are really *heard*³⁰⁶, with my analyses and observations separated.

When contemplating different ways of writing, the 'zigzagging' method³⁰⁷ was considered, with testimony and commentary running side by side on a page. However, I concluded that the research would be more successful in its feminist aim to produce a text if presented as clearly as possible. This style and presentation of research should minimise distortions and the problems in translating the spoken word to the written.

Through the explicit description of methodology and fieldwork, weaknesses within the study should be easily separated from strengths, and a clearer view of the study made evident. The writing has been set in the present tense as much as possible; the past tense suggests a staticness that I feel is inappropriate for a discussion of complex and dynamic issues.

Where the women contributing to the study used ambiguous terms I have attempted to analyse the context in which they are used and connotations implied. Inferred meanings have also been analysed, information often residing in 'attitudes' as discussed by Hendrickson³⁰⁸. Testimony, gathered over several interviews or even during one sitting, may appear contradictory especially when relating to broad and complex concepts such as identity. Rather than viewing such contradictions as conflicting anomalies, they have been treated as valid, complementary and indicative of a complex phenomenon.

While the recording and displaying of women's words is a vital aspect of many forms of feminist research, it is transformed from description to scholarship by the act of analysis³⁰⁹. The methods and ways of writing used in this thesis would be suitable for many different types of feminist research. However, the way in which data

³⁰⁶ Acker, J. Barry, K. & Esseveld, J. 1991:146 in Fonow, M.M. & Cook, J. A. 1991

³⁰⁷ 'Zigzagging' is a method used by Rapport, N. 1994

³⁰⁸ Hendrickson, C.E. 1995:28-29

³⁰⁹ de Groot, J. & Maynard, M. 1993:10, 162, 169

is analysed is more specific to the chosen subjects, different theories radically altering the way data is understood.

This study aims to explore the interactions of Islam and feminism as understood and lived by the participants in their ideas and experiences and within a wider theoretical framework, a methodology posited by Acker, Barry and Esseveld³¹⁰. The research analysis is therefore concerned with investigating the relations between theory and reality and the subsequent generation of ideas that this produces. The analytical approach should thus facilitate the aims of the thesis, the methodology chosen for its relevance to the context rather than current trends within social research and feminism.

There were a number of useful approaches - the anthropological notion of thick description³¹¹ to explore the layers of meaning and concepts that reside in social signifiers such as hijab and also discourse analysis, to understand the nuances of the participant dialogue and the world views it reveals³¹² and on a larger level, the discourses of power investigated throughout the thesis³¹³. The importance of questioning and dismantling the modernist grand narratives, which still retain so much power, and which this thesis in part seeks to contribute, also derives much from the feminist and post-colonial writings used throughout.

The massive impact of post-modernism as a catalyst of the aforementioned 'research revolution' cannot be underestimated. Writers at the forefront of this theoretical stance have played a major role in the critique and rejection of universalism, essentialism and scientism³¹⁴. They have also promoted concepts that are now embedded in feminist theory, such as the value of reflexivity in the generation of open, power-conscious/power-opposed research, the

³¹⁰ Acker, J. Barry, K. & Esseveld, J. 1991:143 in Fonow, M.M. & Cook, J. A. 1991

³¹¹ Geertz, C. 1973

³¹² Garfinkel, H. 1967; Hymes, D. 1972

³¹³ Foucault, M. 1972; Goldschlaeger, A. 1985

³¹⁴ de Groot, J. & Maynard, M. 1993:156, 160

embracing of difference and diversity and the understanding of cultural constructedness³¹⁵.

These are all stated aims of this thesis, yet this does not necessitate the wholesale use of post-modernist methodologies for the analysis. If, for example, the analytical method was one of deconstruction, the post-modernist fragmentation of reality into realities, truth into truths, it would result in participants' words becoming meaningless, lost amongst infinite meanings³¹⁶. Such an analysis would result in the deconstruction of participants' beliefs as metanarrative, an unavoidable descent into accusations of false consciousness and produce a thesis in which meanings and sub-texts were discussed rather than the lived realities and possibilities of women in relation to feminist/Islamic ideas³¹⁷.

De Groot and Maynard have interrogated and criticised post-modernism for this cycle of deconstruction, arguing that it ultimately acts to 'marginalize' and 'misrepresent' women, destroying the tools needed to counteract power. In its battle against essentialism, post-modernist analysis taken to its extreme conclusion reduces concepts such as gender and feminism to impotent 'truths' or 'constructions', ultimately discrediting social analysis itself³¹⁸ and the possibility of feminist activism³¹⁹. As an alternative, de Groot and Maynard³²⁰, propose a middle order approach to analysis, modified from Merton (1968) in order to,

*generate frameworks of understanding which transcend sheer description or empirical generalisation, but which remain, nevertheless, closely embedded in substantive material.*³²¹

³¹⁵ de Groot, J. & Maynard, M. 1993:156; Reinharz, S. 1992:252; Wolf, D. L. 1996: 2, 11, 19

³¹⁶ Maynard, M. 1995:269

³¹⁷ Sangster, J. 1994:22

³¹⁸ de Groot, J. & Maynard, M. 1993:6, 156, 157, 171

³¹⁹ Maynard, M. 1994:22

³²⁰ Maynard, M. 1993, 1994, 1995

³²¹ de Groot, J. & Maynard, M. 1993:169

This methodology is a process that negotiates a path between fragmentation and essentialism, by which the relevant concepts are used as tools rather than fixed categories and meanings are rooted in reality, a reality that is not viewed as static, but rather contextualised³²². It is also a solution to Acker, Barry and Esseveld's dilemma to produce a methodology that allows the researcher to analyse, i.e. 'go beyond the experience of the researched' without 'violating their reality'³²³. Consequently, a phenomenological, hermeneutical process of analysis has been applied to this thesis, a way of including and moving beyond description into interpretation, without theoretically destroying the meanings or reality of 'structures' such as the women's words, and Islam and feminism as theory and practice. It also follows that I should accept the 'controversial' feminist practice of believing the participants unless I have reason.

The success of this methodology was affirmed throughout the analytical process, as it became clear that the women's words and narratives are themselves highly analytical. Participants were in no way passive providers of description, rather they actively conceptualised their own ideas and experiences. This has resulted in a far richer, multifaceted and feminist understanding, as my own analyses are an addition to those provided by the participants - the analysis is multi-perspectival³²⁴. This methodology uses the analytical approach of writers such as Barry³²⁵, who in the context of constructing a 'women-centred politics' expresses the 'desire to understand, in their own terms, women's ideas... & attitudes...' ³²⁶. This position is needed, according to Barry, to redress the imbalance found within conventional modes of political analysis - and I would add the methodologies of many forms of social science - in which women are marginalised or rendered invisible³²⁷.

³²² Maynard, M. 1995:270,272, 277

³²³ Acker, J. Barry, K. & Esseveld, J. 1991:142, 143 in Fonow, M.M. & Cook, J. A. 1991

³²⁴ Rapport, N. & Overing, J. 2000:351

³²⁵ Barry, A-M. 1993. in de Groot, J. & Maynard, M. 1993:40-61

³²⁶ Barry, A-M. 1993:41 and also 46,53 in de Groot, J. & Maynard, M. 1993:40-61

³²⁷ Barry, M-A. 1993:42

However, such an analytical perspective is not without problems. In particular there is a concern regarding the misinterpretation of participants' meanings. This is a risk that any research faces beyond the descriptive: what if the participants disagree with the framework of explanation and interpretation in which I have positioned them? How can the power inherent in this objectification be counteracted³²⁸? To an extent, the commitment to contextualisation and actually hearing / comprehending the women's words reduces the chances of misinterpreting women's meanings. Confirming transcripts with participants is not enough, rather the extra step would be to show the work to participants³²⁹ and instigate a dialogue in which theory and analysis could be debated and improved. This is a process that has not yet been undertaken, but one that I would hope to pursue in the future.

To summarise, the methodology of this thesis attempts to fulfil the aims compiled by Abu Lughod: to refuse generalisation; to take into account history and specific contexts; to carefully reconstruct people's own interpretations and to understand participants beliefs and actions³³⁰. This should lead to an understanding of people's realities - varied and contradictory socialities that should be celebrated³³¹ instead of veiled by essentialist pseudo-science or destroyed by deconstruction. In addition, the participants' voices will be analysed in the context of the thesis' theoretical framework, interpreting and understanding their ideas and experiences in the wider theoretical context. In this way, it is hoped that the women's realities will contribute to feminist understandings and activist possibilities.

³²⁸ Acker, J. Barry, K. & Esseveld, J. 1991:142 in Fonow, M.M. & Cook, J. A. 1991

³²⁹ Acker, J. Barry, K. & Esseveld, J. 1991:147 in Fonow, M.M. & Cook, J. A. 1991

³³⁰ Abu Lughod, L. 1993:14

³³¹ Marcus, G. & Fischer, M. 1986:15

4. Conversion: Theories and Stories

This chapter seeks to understand how and why participants converted, despite the objections raised by their families, local communities and wider society. The active process of conversion and the meanings for participants provide interesting perspectives for feminism. The processes of conversion mark the point for participants at which the perceptions of others and of themselves changed and where discourses in this context began to collide. Becoming Muslim was a choice made by the women that brought about major repercussions.

Before examining the concept it is helpful to consider the terminology. The dictionary definition of the verb *to convert* is *to change in form, character or function*³³² that is, to change from one 'state' or position to another. In relation to belief this could be within a religious tradition, between faiths or between faith and unbelief³³³. Therefore, in the context of conversion to Islam, it is the process of change from an individual or group's faith or lack of faith to a state of Islam, a superficially straightforward notion. In unpacking these definitions, academics have tended to view conversion in two ways: a sudden alteration of belief and identity, or a blending of old ideas with new. Problematically, both presume the existence of 'past' and 'present' identities³³⁴.

The first dominant view defines *conversion* as 'a radical change of world views'³³⁵ where an individual is involved in a severing of the life narrative before/after conversion³³⁶. In describing conversion from this perspective, phrases such as 'radical journey', 'desired exile'³³⁷ and an 'uprooting'³³⁸ are used, suggesting that an individual undergoes an identity transformation. The subtext in the case of

³³² The Concise Oxford Dictionary 8th ed. 252 (1)

³³³ Kaplan, S. 2004:374; Sultan, M. 1999:326

³³⁴ Daynes, S. 1999:315

³³⁵ Wohlrab-Sahr, M. 1999:353 quoting Travisano, R.1970

³³⁶ Allievi, S. 1999:284

³³⁷ Daynes, S. 1999:314

³³⁸ Daynes, S. 1999:313

Islamic conversion is that the individual alters from being an insider with 'Western' values to becoming the Other, a stranger³³⁹. It is interesting that Islam is labelled by some authors as a 'foreign' religion, therefore defining its adherents as outsiders and converts as having crossed an identity border³⁴⁰, a point that will be examined further in this chapter.

By contrast, the second perspective rejects the term *conversion* for *alternation* which is used to describe changes in belief and practice that a researcher views as syncretic, i.e. less dichotomous than changes in the before/after narrative.³⁴¹ Some authors writing from this perspective prefer the term *adhesion*, such as Nock [1933] who suggests that new beliefs are 'tacked onto' older ones in opposition to the 'dramatic transformation' of conversion³⁴². Syncretism is a theory often used to describe the phenomena of belief systems such as Brazilian Candomblé, in which the rituals and beliefs of Roman Catholicism collide/mix/blend with Yoruba *Irunmole*-derived beliefs in spirits, possession and sacrifice³⁴³. The general understanding of syncretism is therefore a post-modernist deconstruction of fixed definitions of religion³⁴⁴. Rather than talking about Christianity, syncretism suggests numerous *Christianities*, the adherents to which may share some beliefs and strongly oppose others, converts blending or mixing previous beliefs with new ones.

The two categories are often presented as polarised, in Wohlrab-Sahr's words, the 'symbolic battle' of conversion with its metaphorically violent nature, versus alternation and the subtle metamorphosis of 'syncretism'. Thus, the two dominant perspectives present definitions in which *conversion* signifies a clear differentiation - a sudden and complete change from one clearly defined pure belief to a different clearly defined pure belief, and *alternation* which is used to suggest that a person's conversion is

³³⁹ Allievi, S. 1999:293; Daynes, S. 1999:313, 314; Köse, A. 1999:303, 306; Wohlrab-Sahr, M. 1999:352

³⁴⁰ Köse, A. 1999:307; Wohlrab-Sahr, M. 1999:352

³⁴¹ Wohlrab-Sahr, M. 1999. 353 quoting Travisano, R. 1970

³⁴² Kaplan, S. 2004:374 quoting Nock, A.D. 1933

³⁴³ Shapiro, D. J. 1995: 830-831

³⁴⁴ Johnson, P. C. 2002

syncretic, i.e. a shift over blurred and fluid boundaries of definition between two or more already mixed beliefs. The fixed nature of these positions limit their use to an untenable degree so must consequently be rejected.

In the case of religious syncretism, it is clear that such a deconstructionist theory cannot be applied to this study. All Muslims, despite differences of opinion on various Islamic practices all agree that there is one Islam and that to talk about 'Islams' is a contradiction. However, it is possible to apply the idea of syncretism to the *cultural* practices of Muslims: it is obvious that the culture of Chinese Muslims is distinct from the culture of Algerian Muslims - they believe in the same tenets of Islam, under which they live with different customs and even values. Syncretism is therefore useful in talking about lived experiences as will be discussed in the following chapter on identity, but will not be applied to the participants' discussions of conversion in terms of Islamic belief and practice.

The women who took part in this study also contradicted the dominant notion of conversion as an ahistorical and unsituated 'faith swap'. The women's ideas and experiences illustrate that conversion is an ongoing *process*³⁴⁵ in which attitudes, values and cultural understandings are maintained, altered and rejected in varying degrees. Therefore, like other authors, the perspective taken in this thesis views the process as slow and comprising different phases, an initial embracing of attractive concepts followed by a 'reformulation phase'³⁴⁶, underlining conversion as 'complex'³⁴⁷ and 'variegated'³⁴⁸.

Reflecting the theoretical perspective, the terminology used by the participants in this study also varied. The majority used the word *convert* and clarified it in such ways as, 'I changed from one state to another'³⁴⁹ or 'I use the word *convert* because that is what I am - a

³⁴⁵ Allievi, S. 1999:285,287,288; Kaplan, S. 2004:376

³⁴⁶ Kaplan, S. 2004:380; Sultan, M. 1999:325

³⁴⁷ Daynes, S. 1999:313; Sultan, M. 1999:326,334; Rambo, L.R. 1999:259

³⁴⁸ Kaplan, S. 2004:381

³⁴⁹ words of A.

person who has changed from a non-Muslim into a Muslim'³⁵⁰. However, a minority of participants and a number of the women who approached me in the early stages of finding participants had a strong preference for the term *revert*. This was because they wished to convey a sense of reverting back to Islam: some referring to a newborn's clean slate, others referring to the state of the soul pre-birth. Others still, saw their change of faith in terms of a long process that led to 'embracing Islam' or 'accepting Islam'. It was also common for participants when discussing converts to refer to 'new Muslims', although a few³⁵¹ outwardly rejected the term as useful feeling it branded all converts, no matter how long they had been Muslim, as 'new' and therefore less 'authentic' than born Muslims. In addition, for the purpose of analysis the phrase 'new Muslims' acts only as a description of the people rather than referring to the process that they have undertaken.

With this background, the word *convert* will be used for several reasons. Firstly, the widely understood meaning of conversion is to change from one perspective to another and this describes the process, no matter how different the details may be, of every individual or group who becomes Muslim. Secondly, although it is important to analyse the different forms of the conversion process: fast or slow, severing or syncretic, the specification of particular terms acts as labelling rather than explaining. It is an aim of this thesis to analyse the diverse and individual experiences of conversion that participants described rather than search for ways to neatly reduce and categorise. Thirdly, the majority of participants used the term 'convert', and it is important that the voices as a group are represented as accurately as possible.

In order to unpack the concept of conversion, a useful place to start is to ask more deeply what conversion to Islam *is*. This can be answered via two paradigms: secular academic theory and Islamic theory. The purpose of academic theory is to provide a way to understand a phenomenon that may be complex and seemingly

³⁵⁰ words of K.

³⁵¹ Such as E., Z., A. and R.

impenetrable at first glance. Despite the common claim to objectivity, theories are always subjective, rooted in the perspectives of a particular discipline, theorist and the wider beliefs and understanding of the society in which they are produced³⁵².

In this context, as a phenomenon to be studied, conversion to a faith is particularly problematic, especially in the context of 'Western women' converting to Islam. There are two reasons for this: in general, religious conversion in any form is a process far removed from the academic world, while conversion to Islam by Western women is viewed, in the context of Western societies in general, as a somewhat disturbing anomaly. In addition, there is the ever-present problem in the study of conversion: the inability of one individual to determine or measure spiritual change in another³⁵³.

With the tendency to apply the two dominant perspectives in analysing conversion, a chasm exists between the theories of converts themselves and the academics trying to understand them. Conversion is rooted in the messy depths of human experience, resulting in a struggle for some theorists to make sense of something that an individual actor may partly explain in such terms as faith, spirituality and guidance from God. Such views do not fit in to the overwhelmingly secular nature of Western academia or the outlooks of most academics engaged in developing its theories³⁵⁴. As a result, Rambo explains that while converts may use spirituality and faith as a primary explanation,

*scholars in the human sciences, almost without exception, neglect, trivialize or totally reject the role of religion and/or spirituality in their theories of conversion.*³⁵⁵

Where a researcher does hold religious beliefs, which may be a very important aspect of their life and one of emotional importance, there is a danger, especially if the convert is leaving or entering the faith

³⁵² Rambo, L.R. 1999. 260

³⁵³ Etherington, N. 2002:422

³⁵⁴ Rambo. L. R. 1999. 261

³⁵⁵ Rambo. L. R. 1999. 264

of the researcher, that a the study will have problematic levels of bias³⁵⁶. As a fellow Muslim convert it is important that I am aware of this problem. I have therefore tried to avoid superimposing my experiences on those of the women involved, making sure that my analyses refer specifically to participants' words.

A wide range of theories from various academic fields attempt to explain the phenomenon of religious conversion, that is, *why* people convert. Many of these are however, irrelevant or academically unsuitable here. Some, particularly from the field of psychology, which could be extremely useful for understanding the process and 'mental journey' of the conversion experience, instead attempt to locate and describe abnormal mental states or events that appear to trigger conversion, for example childhood trauma or pathological insecurities. In reducing explanation to the pursuit of concrete causal reasons and descriptions, these theories fail to ask participants why or look at the wider picture, while the tendency to view conversion as an abnormality skews the resulting models in a negative way, resulting in limited and limiting explanations³⁵⁷.

In addition, many of the traditional explanations used specifically in the context of conversion to Islam, Islamisation theories, are often rooted in racist, Orientalist notions of Islam. Such theories limit explanation by following traditional assumptions on the 'causes' of conversion, for example of Islam spreading 'by the sword', by bribery or through political necessity in the context of group conversions³⁵⁸. As such, they are unhelpful and irrelevant stereotypes³⁵⁹. Similarly, notions of group conversion in general, classified by Allievi as *relationnelles*³⁶⁰ - those of a 'socially contagious'³⁶¹ nature - are of little use in unpacking the process of

³⁵⁶ Kaplan, S. 2004:380

³⁵⁷ For example Freudian influenced works of Allison, J. 1969; Ullman, C. 1989 as cited by Rambo, L.R. 1993. 52 & 1999. 266 respectively

³⁵⁸ See early explanations given for Britons converting to Islam in Bulliet, R.W. 1979

³⁵⁹ Rambo. L. R. 1999. 264-267

³⁶⁰ Allievi, S. 1998:291, 297

³⁶¹ García-Arenal, M. 1999:280

conversion by British individuals who are going very much against the grain of their society³⁶².

Academic perspectives that do offer scope for understanding the conversions described in this study are various feminist theories, intellectualist theory, identity theory, ritual theory and process theory³⁶³. The extent of each perspective's usefulness will be demonstrated in their relevance to the participants' stories. Structural-functionalist theory looks for causal explanations, particularly in terms of group conversions, a perspective that too easily leads to a static and reductionist appraisal, an *explaining away* of conversion. An alternative, as suggested by Allievi, is to look at what Islam offers a potential convert, elements found in Islam that an individual may be attracted to³⁶⁴, which by its very nature is to embrace the subjective and personal.

The processes of conversion must be seen within the context of individuals exercising choice, an important perspective for feminism and one which unified the varying experiences of the women in this study. Therefore, the main analyses of the conversion stories lie in the women's own explanations. As the agents experiencing the process, participant narratives must be analysed to find the women's own explanations of conversion - the trigger points that initiate conversion, the subsequent journey to Islam and the continuing processes after conversion. As Rambo summarises, 'conversion is what a group or person says it is'³⁶⁵.

Thus the analytical methodology used is a combination of comparative and narrative approaches. The women's ideas and experiences are viewed as important aspects of conversion in their own right; while together they provide an interesting inter-comparative analysis. In addition, viewed in relation to understandings generated in other studies, they contribute to a far larger discourse on conversion.

³⁶² Allievi, S. 1999:286; Franks, M. 2000

³⁶³ Rambo, L.R. 1993

³⁶⁴ Allievi, S. 1999:283

³⁶⁵ Rambo, L. R. 1993:7

The other paradigm vital to understanding conversion to Islam is the Islamic perspective itself. For Muslims and those converting to Islam, conversion means to believe, understand and pronounce the two testifications of Islamic faith known as the *Shahadatayn*. This can be done in Arabic or any other language with the meaning, 'I know, believe and declare that there is only one God and nothing deserves to be worshipped except Him³⁶⁶ and that Muhammad is the Messenger of God'. Providing this belief and the understandings held within it are maintained, an individual remains a Muslim from this point even if they do not practice the outward manifestations i.e. practices of the faith. The individual therefore passes from the state of unbelief (in Islam) to belief (in Islam) through this utterance. An Islamic religious explanation of conversion will always be based in the understanding that it was due to the Will of God, in this case through *Hidayah*, meaning guidance. However, this concept does not deny the lived experience of the individual's conversion, who may have come to embrace Islam in any number of ways.

Bringing the two paradigms together, it becomes apparent that theories relating to the lived experience of conversion expounded by secular academia are compatible *within* the encompassing religious explanation of the Islamic paradigm. That is, while the final explanation in Islam will always relate to the divine - the Will of God - the human experience can also be explored. The women who tell their stories here, as is a prerequisite for Muslim understanding, explain the phenomenon of conversion as the Will of God. Explaining their lived experiences of this guidance, all the women gave religious based explanations i.e. their conversions were a direct result of religious belief and faith in Islam by the Will of God.

In addition to the primary explanation of belief, other factors were described. Some of these secondary lived experiences of conversion included, as will be further described, an attraction to Islam because of its ritual practices and the status accorded to women in Islam.

³⁶⁶ It is important to note that the masculine pronoun in relation to the Islamic concept of God does not connote gender in any way, but is used due to the linguistic construction of Arabic and other languages, acceptable because it is used in the Quran.

These multi-layered explanations allow us to view conversion as a complex process that simultaneously underlines its individual nature and the overarching similarities.

This acknowledgment of *Hidayah* combined with the comparative and narrative analysis of secondary lived experiences upholds the sense of women's choices and agency, but also recognizes the existence of external situations in which the women converted. As previously mentioned, positive, feminist psychological methodologies could have proved a useful resource in exploring the links between internal and external experience and circumstance, but were not accessible. In addition, it became apparent that by accepting the understandings and analyses of the women themselves, it would be problematic to discuss these internal and external states without input from each individual. Hence, the secondary factors such as the internal spiritual factors or external social factors are analysed and understood in conjunction with the women's own explanations and descriptions.

Using the methodology of Allievi³⁶⁷ and others, the conversion narratives that follow have been arranged in a way that allows for the viewing and analysis of different secondary factors involved in the conversion process. As mentioned by Kaplan, one uniting motivation in all of the secondary factors that can be observed is that *people convert in order to improve their lives*³⁶⁸. It is *how* they understand this to be the case which helps us to understand the conversion process.

Without trying to oversimplify or generalise the processes, divisions have been made between the participants. It became apparent when comparing transcripts that while all interviewees were unified in their foundational understanding of conversion, i.e. the belief in Islam and subsequent embracing of the faith through *Hidayah*, the secondary lived factors could be divided into two broad categories: conversions

³⁶⁷ Allievi, S. 1999

³⁶⁸ Kaplan, S. 2004:381

characterised predominantly by spirituality, and those fuelled by life-strategy.

For example, participants whose secondary factors were founded in the spiritual often spoke of the spiritual agency of Islam, or the lack of division between secular and religious spheres of life. Participants whose secondary factors were predominantly fuelled by life strategy gave reasons such as the attraction of close Muslim communities and sense of Ummah, or viewed marriage to a Muslim man as playing a large part in their conversion. Again it must be highlighted that this division is an analytical tool and not an intention to portray women's conversions as either 'spiritual' or a 'life strategy'. The conversions that participants described were ultimately rooted in spirituality and intellectual choice and all to varying extents were, even unavoidably, situated / related to life strategy.

The primary reason for conversion mentioned by all participants was belief in the tenets of Islam. That is, the fundamental and necessary reason for conversion understood by participants was that by the Will of God, they had come to believe and accept the faith as their own. Interviewees were at times explicit but it was often assumed that conversion because of faith and divine guidance was something that just '*goes without saying*'³⁶⁹, the apparently obvious and everyday that Bourdieu highlighted as possessing so much power. The focus on 'the obvious' is discussed by authors such as Overing, who in their quest to understand peoples' realities, call for an 'anthropology of the everyday'³⁷⁰. Where once researchers thirsted for the exotic and unusual in social interaction, students of qualitative theory must also tap into what an actor does *not* say, the things that seem from the inside to be obvious or uninteresting as part of everyday existence. Perhaps because of my own status as a convert, the understanding that faith and religious belief were foundational to conversion was not always explicitly stated, rather alluded to. *R.*, a medical student who had converted in her first year of university after learning about Islam through friends said,

³⁶⁹ Bourdieu, P. 1977:167

³⁷⁰ Overing, J. & Passes, A. 2000:7

It's hard to describe the process of embracing Islam. Logically you understand that God exists, there are proofs everywhere, but that doesn't explain why people convert, because it also involves faith. Islam makes sense where other religions don't. But that doesn't explain it all does it? ...There are loads of reasons I loved Islam but why I took the step from appreciating to embracing ... well it's Hidayah isn't it.

A., who converted to Islam at the age of 19 having been introduced to Muslims and Islamic beliefs through her sister suggested that belief and faith are difficult to articulate:

It's very hard to explain just how I became a Muslim, to give a really straightforward explanation. All I can say is that as I heard about Islam, it just seemed right, like someone explaining to a child that the stuff around us is called air and we breathe it - you may not have heard it before but you know instinctively that it's right. It's strange because I've never been religious, or even given it all much thought, but when I heard I just believed. And I know that from the outside it probably sounds mad, but all I can say is that it's guidance.

Correspondingly, M. explained,

*You get to a point where you've got to make a decision. If you believe in something strongly enough then you do it, you make that choice even though you knew like your family won't like it, that you think there'll be problems... but you can't ignore it. If you want to do something as massive as converting you do it. Otherwise you're not being true to yourself. Well that's how I feel anyway. Mind you, some people don't end up doing it, or say, 'well I will, but not yet, sometime in the future'. *MashaAllahu* kaan [Whatever Allah wills to be will be].*

When asked about her motivation for converting, K., who first learned about Islam through friends at university and converted shortly after graduating felt,

Belief's obviously the main thing; if you don't believe in Islam then you're not a Muslim...

Similarly, H. explained,

I started learning about Islam through my boyfriend, and then it suddenly occurred to me that if this [Islam] was right, then my life was leading me down a really bad path. So it was fear really, fear of my own behaviour and the consequences and feeling that it were right and wanting to. Being Muslim's very important to me, I'm so glad I am, alhamdulillah [all praise is due to God].

With her use of *alhamdulillah*, H. contextualises her intellectual choices with an implicit reference to the Will of God.

As well as the understanding of faith and guidance as foundational to conversion, some participants mentioned that part of the attraction was that Islamic beliefs corresponded with their own, personal beliefs. This was the case in relation to creed, practices and ethics. Sultan mentions 'confirmation of ideas' as a factor given by participants in her study of Swedish converts³⁷¹, which is backed up by the findings in this study. However, in the Swedish context, Sultan suggests that converts come from secular backgrounds³⁷². From the research here, having asked participants about their own backgrounds and the backgrounds of converts they know, it seems that in the UK converts come from various religious backgrounds including agnostic, atheist, various Christian denominations, Hindu, Jewish and Sikh backgrounds. In the case of this study, for the majority of participants - whether they still had a faith up until conversion, had lost their faith through disbelief in particular

³⁷¹ Sultan, M. 1999:328

³⁷² Sultan, M. 1999:326

doctrines, or had held their own personal, idiosyncratic religious beliefs - their faith in the existence of God had remained. Islam presented a creed that fitted this understanding of God, fuelling the conversion process and the point of conversion. However, some participants had never held any religious belief, such as ZO. who said,

It's a bit weird ... I'm so not the religious type, never have been, but here I am talking about being a Muslim! Maybe 'cos I'm not quite used to it yet, I feel a bit awkward.

Similarly, A. commented,

I would never've imagined in a million years I'd end up a Muslim, I never even thought about the big questions, and when I did I just thought, well we'll all end up with the worms, just dead and that's it ...

Participants often used the terms 'atheism' and 'agnosticism' alongside each other, having held both types of belief at some time. Converts who had been atheist or agnostic all mentioned Islamic creed as having triggered the conversion process and that it had been a slow building and changing of atheist ideas to ones in which religious belief could exist. Z., 27, who felt her conversion process to Islam had been quite slow explained,

I remember at primary school deciding that the idea of an old, bearded man in the sky was ridiculous and my parents being agnostic or I guess atheist, which I called myself, basically backed that up ... and even when I was a teenager and spent lots of time talking about how great Marxism was, I still had my own personal set of beliefs about God... I believed in God, not the beliefs we were taught but that to be worthy of worship, a real God, you know, without limits, must be totally different from what people can imagine, and definitely without a body, gender, all those things. When I started hearing about Islamic belief, it just clicked with what I already thought.

A. spoke of her attraction to Islam while questioning the atheism in which she'd been brought up:

I'd never really thought about religion. I was brought up atheist and didn't really question it. And kids at school who were openly Christian got the piss taken out of them and the only two Muslims were from Pakistani backgrounds and I thought of it as a cultural thing. When I got to about sixteen, I started questioning my ideas and started to feel that I was some insignificant being in a much bigger picture... Then when I heard about Islam and the beliefs through my sister, it all seemed completely logical. You only have to look around you at nature or to know that no fingerprint or snowflake is the same to realise that God exists.

During A.'s, interview, she mentioned a mutual acquaintance, P., who had also converted to Islam. P. was of particular interest to A., as he had been a staunch and active atheist before suddenly converting to Islam:

Remember P? Could he've been anymore of an atheist? He would love arguing with those 'irrational' Christians and Muslims! I've never met anyone with such a dramatic story... I'll retell it for your research: he went to Syria and Turkey on a year out and came back a Muslim, saying he'd had a strange experience, a moment of realisation, as he stood outside the Blue Mosque looking inside. I never knew whether he meant it had been a sudden St Paul-style realisation, or whether it was an acceptance of the Islamic beliefs through logic. Either way, faith and belief in some combination must have been paramount [to his conversion].

The transition from agnosticism or atheism to Islamic belief may be explained to some degree as part of what Daynes describes as the

'response to fundamental questions'³⁷³. This theme is also relevant to participants with religious backgrounds who often articulated explicitly against the faith in which they had been brought up, particularly in terms of the ability to answer questions of belief in a logical manner³⁷⁴. R. said,

I was brought up a Catholic; my family still practice now. But from an early age I started to question the main beliefs: the Trinity, Original Sin, confession, everything. It got to the point when I was a teenager when I'd sit in church, because I still believed in God, but I'd have this feeling that I was a fake, and I was listening without believing, just because I felt the need for some sort of spirituality. When I learned about Islam at university it was just amazing, I found a way that I fully believed in, not just wanted to believe in.

R. was typical of participants and those involved in other research, who felt that the Trinity and other Christian dogmas were 'illogical' and 'unbelievable'³⁷⁵. Rationalism was seen very much as a trigger in the conversion process, with Islam as the 'middle way'³⁷⁶. ZO. described an important part of her attraction to Islam as,

The very logical, straightforward beliefs in Islam, the concept of Tawhīd³⁷⁷, all the Prophets... You can question Islamic beliefs and get straight answers, where as when I questioned the Christian beliefs I was brought up with I only ended up making more questions.

Similarly, E. asserted,

Islam takes monotheism to its logical conclusion; it hasn't been tainted by other influences. The Vandals for example

³⁷³ Daynes, S. 1999:316, my translation

³⁷⁴ This was also found by Daynes, S. 1999:318; Köse, A. 1999:305

³⁷⁵ For similar findings see Allievi, S. 1999:291; Setta. E. 1999.341,343

³⁷⁶ Allievi, S. 1999:291

³⁷⁷ *Tawhīd* is the Islamic belief in the oneness of God: as Abu Hanifah explained in his book, *al-Fiqh-ul-Akbar. Allah is One, but not in terms of numbers; rather Allah is One in that he has no partner* (red. taken orally)

never believed in the Trinity, but the Roman ideas superseded them.

M. explained in a similar vein,

Islam is the middle way, yes we have faith, but this is satisfied with logical proofs, we don't have to shove difficult concepts to the back of our heads.

Several participants suggested that Islam attracted people who had become disillusioned with the idea of having a Church and clergy³⁷⁸. For example, Z. remarked,

I think the Islamic system, where the community chooses who it follows and there are loads of different scholars and imams, it keeps the power away from one set of people like the Church.

Interviewees spoke of the uninterrupted relationship a Muslim has with God, an Imam fulfilling a social function for the benefit of the community far removed from a Christian priest or vicar's doctrinally sanctioned roles. E. illustrated this when she exclaimed,

How can a man think he has the right to give absolution? That was something that put me off very early on.

A. considered,

When you think about it, a local imam only has limited localised power. Muslims in an area can choose to go to different mosques, or they'll choose another imam - if they don't like his khutbas [sermons], they'll go elsewhere. He's only official by way of the people, not put their by a powerful organisation...

³⁷⁸ See also Allievi, S. 1999:290; Köse, A. 1999:308

This lack of intermediaries³⁷⁹ can be seen as an opportunity for religious and spiritual freedom within a specified set of beliefs. This was illustrated by *Sh.* who said,

It's just me and God, I can gain knowledge in the same way as the next person. I'm accountable for my own actions... I'm my own responsibility.

The individual onus again highlighted by *Al.*

It's very personal and free, I can be as practicing or as unpracticing as I like and it's between me and Allah.

These statements reflect all the participants' views that belief is foundational to conversion. This concept of belief is understood by Intellectualist theorists such as Horton as a way in which people find agency in the quest to make sense of the world around us³⁸⁰.

However, this does not explain why a person may switch from one view to another in the way that many of the women in this study converted to Islam, nor does it explain why Islam would be chosen over any other faith or belief. For the Muslim women interviewed here, the explanation of *hidayah* was paramount.

Having established belief as the foundational explanation for conversion, other secondary factors that are felt by participants to be influential, must be analysed. Spirituality, distinct from belief, is used here to describe participants' understanding of their relationship to Islam and God in terms such as love, realisation, spiritual desire and need. This was sometimes described by participants as Sufism³⁸¹, and by others as spirituality, and was important to all participants to some extent. The importance of spirituality in conversions is described by Daynes: 'to become Muslim is to discover "spirituality" to some degree'³⁸². Attempting to theorise spirituality is highly problematic and traditional explanations

³⁷⁹ Also mentioned by Allievi, S. 1999:292

³⁸⁰ Rambo, L. R. 1999:264

³⁸¹ See Allievi, S. 1999:291; Daynes, S. 1999:316; Setta. E. 1999:342

³⁸² Daynes, S. 1999:316, my translation.

have tended to reduce people's experiences to the biological and genetic.

Other theorists use traditional discourses to link notions of spirituality with emotion and, in turn, with the 'feminine' and the 'irrational'. Similarly, psychoanalytical theorists inspired by the Freudian tradition have gone to great lengths to tie religious, emotional experience as dangerously unpredictable, pathological and feminised behaviour. A number of studies³⁸³ point to spiritual need brought on by personal crisis, and the idea that the convert is using their new faith as an emotional crutch. Without psychiatric expertise and analysis for each individual, it is impossible to prove or disprove such a theory. However, none of the participants in this study spoke about or indicated any period of great personal trouble and as such, crisis theories are irrelevant.

In addition, these 'scientific' or objective notions are problematic to qualitative work as they frame spiritual need and desire in a way that suggests personal weakness or deficiencies. Such perspectives act to strip agency and therefore power from their subjects, as do Marxist theorists positing false consciousness³⁸⁴. From the participants' perspectives, their attraction to Islam explicitly involves the ideas of agency, choice and desire. This is illustrated by Z. who described her desire for Islam:

I wish I could explain to people, non-Muslims and even some Muslims, how much I love Islam... It's like... as I put my belief into practice, that love intensifies. Islam allows each Muslim to progress along a path... I know I can always do more, and there's a balance between my deficiency spurring me on and the knowledge that I can always go further, at my own pace, moving forward. There's always a little part of me that kind of looks on from the outside, when I dismissed words like 'spirituality' as happy-clappy stuff... I can see where people

³⁸³ See for example Allievi, S. 1999:295; Köse, A. 1999:305

³⁸⁴ See Rambo, L. R. 1999

who think that are coming from... but all I can say now, is that Islam is my passion.

A. echoed this positive stance,

I love Islam, I believe in it - there comes a point when you can't resist. You just have to take that jump.

AB., who had become interested in Islam in her early thirties and converted a few years later explained,

I think people who aren't religious, or maybe it's better to say those who aren't spiritual, find it hard to understand why someone would convert. I know some converts who were really searching for a faith and others are like me, just stumbling into it, but when you believe in something and you make a conscious effort to embrace it, you feel very fulfilled... I didn't feel a hole needed to be filled, it felt like I opened a door and discovered a whole new bit.

S. described the attraction of spiritual agency with or without involving guidance from other people such as shaykhs:

With Islam it's just you and Allah. There are people who can guide you, imams and shaykhs, your friends, but no organised Church, no priests. It boils down to what's in your heart and what actions you do. And you do it for Allah.

This concept of spiritual agency within Islam was repeatedly mentioned in relation to belief and practice. Women are attracted to the concept of an uninterrupted, direct relationship with God. In addition, agency is claimed through the sense of responsibility for themselves without interference from a hierarchical establishment: to go forward and actively work at improving and developing the inner and outer manifestations of faith. Many participants also talked about increasing their knowledge and understanding, *Sh.* explaining,

We have the original Quran that we can all study and understand to our own degrees³⁸⁵.

A. also reflected,

I think one of the amazing things is that in Islam we are encouraged to learn, to understand and increase our knowledge.

Similarly, R. said,

Islam challenges Muslims to learn and to teach. That's a really powerful idea... forget opiates for the people and all that, we've been told to question and find out... to be active.

The women were also attracted by the diversity in what can constitute a 'spiritual woman' in Islam. Those from Christian backgrounds had been brought up with the idea of a nun being the ultimate in female spirituality and had been impressed by Islam's challenge to balance the worldly and spiritual. That is, Islam promotes the interaction of daily life, for example being a mother, sexually active wife and career woman, with spirituality. K. explained:

Our purpose is to worship³⁸⁶ but at the same time we go about our daily lives - our normal everyday lives are part of that worship. So of course I think this is a very attractive aspect of Islam... You can do dhikr on the bus and say Bismillah before you eat!

R. reflected what a number of other participants mentioned, that:

There are no nuns or monks. We can all share in that kind of spirituality but have jobs, get married, give birth, have fun.

³⁸⁵ See similar ideas in Allievi, S. 1999:292

³⁸⁶ Here A. refers to a famous verse of the Quran: Surat adh-Dhariyat, verse 46, which means, *I created the jinn and humans to order them with worship.*

Similarly, N. remarked,

I always thought the idea of a vow of silence or vow of chastity was so exclusive, like you have to choose between being human or being devoted to God... life's about serving Allah through living...

At any one moment a Muslim can turn a seemingly banal act into one of spiritual significance, as K. suggested, *by making the intention to eat to keep healthy for the sake of Allah*. As well as the metaphysical lack of secular / religious space, the physical is also undivided. Although a mosque is a specified place of worship, any clean space can be used, from an office to a beach, offering an alternative to those disillusioned with, as ZO. articulated, *the whole church on Sundays thing*. Thus, participants rejected the secular-religious binary and the closely related modern/traditional discourse, A. commenting,

The idea that at the bottom there's so-called 'tradition' and religion, and at the top there's 'modernity' and secularity and all the other things that are held up as good, like democracy and freedom... it's nonsense.

In addition, the ritual aspects of Islamic practice were cited as factors fuelling the conversion process. Some participants felt they had been drawn to Islam by the coherence, order and sense of rhythm that the daily prayers and fasting presented. Several participants also cited an attraction to Islam through the awareness prayers and other rituals such as fasting that brought with them a sense of nature: the lunar calendar, working out prayer times from the sun and the subsequent reminder that time is relative. Zh. for example, mentioned,

Prayer and fasting... it's lovely to be connected with nature. You're aware of the patterns in the sun and the moon, the seasons, and it stops you rushing around and forgetting it all.

N. said,

When you first convert, everyone seems to go on about the prayers, you know, 'but you've got to pray five times a day!' which only takes a few minutes each time... I've actually found it hard getting into the habit, but I feel it does me a lot of good.

Some participants, who started to practice rituals before actually converting, enjoyed the way prayer acted as a spiritual reminder: in the words of *Rh.*,

It's a reminder of more important things when I'm getting bogged down at work or stressing about something stupid.

R. described her admiration of the ritualised elements of Islamic spirituality:

One of the things that first got me interested in Islam was watching my friends praying. Not only was the whole idea of people doing it the same united, as well as their own personal prayers really nice, but also the way that prayers were throughout the day, with the natural rhythm of the day and night and the seasons and things. I watched my practicing friends have their lunch, pray and then go to class - faith just part of the day... not just for Sundays, or funerals or when something bad happened.

These spiritual aspects of Islam were felt by participants to have fuelled their interest and love of the religion to the point of becoming Muslim. The process of conversion is therefore continuous and actively generated through the interaction of the individual with Islamic beliefs and practice.

In addition to the foundational aspects of faith and belief, and the secondary factors of spirituality, a number of converts indicated that their conversions also involved secondary factors relating to life

strategy: the ways in which 'worldly' life can be improved. Writings on conversion have tended to associate socio-cultural factors with group conversions, understanding the factors to be foundational rather than secondary. These include research referring to the presence of successful Muslim traders in Ethiopia³⁸⁷, and studies on individuals living in a Muslim-dominated state, for example European conversions in the Islamic empires³⁸⁸.

However, the women who participated in this study are individuals who live in a context where Muslims are a weak minority. Yet, these participants often mentioned life strategy, such as identification with a community, as important secondary factors in their conversions, supporting other research such as that of García-Arenal³⁸⁹.

A sense of community was the most commonly cited life strategy. *Sh.* illustrated the importance and attraction of community on an international scale through the concept of Ummah:

Belief's obviously the main thing, if you don't believe in Islam then you're not a Muslim, but there were other things that attracted me. I think it's so nice to be part of the Ummah, that when I see a Muslim from the other side of the world, I feel that they're my brother or sister. It's a real unity through faith, not colour or nationality or anything like that, but belief.

K. described,

I think it's almost impossible to understand what having the Ummah feels like. As soon as you convert you feel it... actually I felt it before I converted because I felt jealous in a way when I saw the bond my Muslim friends seemed to have with total strangers... not a nasty jealousy but I felt it was something I wanted but couldn't have. It's definitely a bonus you get when you convert.

³⁸⁷ Kaplan, S. 2004:373

³⁸⁸ García-Arenal, M. 1999:273

³⁸⁹ García-Arenal, M. 1999:274

E. spoke of the same feeling for the Ummah and its inherent power:

I think one of the reasons people find Muslims and Islam frightening is the sense of affiliation the Ummah has, just as the hadith says, when one part hurts we all feel it. When they talk about loyalty that's what they mean, they think that our brotherhood and sisterhood is stronger than a sense of nation or loyalty to the state.

On a smaller scale, K. described the benefits of the more localised community:

The local Muslim community is really diverse, especially if you go to the main mosque. People make an effort to support each other as Muslims, even though we are so diverse. People offer to look after each other's kids... Ramadan is always hectic because of all the invitations you get, and there's always someone smiling on a bus or saying 'salaam'.

L. highlighted this positive sense of community in the context of her moving areas:

When I converted I made so many fantastic friends, so many lovely sisters at the mosque and round and about. We only moved here a month or so back, but I miss it so much, I don't know any Muslims round here.

The sense of belonging to both a local and international community of Muslims is an attraction for many converts as illustrated here and in other recent studies³⁹⁰. The idea of a brother / sisterhood is spiritually and emotionally appealing both as a reality and symbolically as an ideal for the Muslim community. Z. highlighted this by explaining that through conversion,

³⁹⁰ Allievi, S. 1999:291,292; Daynes, S. 1999:317; Sultan, M. 1999:332, 333

...we become part of a bigger picture, another history, of Islam and Muslims... it's a global story which we're all playing a small part in.

Again and again, the heterogeneous³⁹¹ nature of the community is highlighted as a positive element. M. for example said,

You can't stereotype a Muslim. There's every culture and colour under the sky and that's very beautiful.

A. mentioned,

I can't wait to go on Hajj insha'Allah, to see all those Muslims from all over the world worshipping Allah together, with only that purpose... it must be unbelievable.

Z. also mentioned the flexibility inherent in heterogeneity:

I think a great strength that Islam provides is variety. There're so many different ways of doing things, yet we're also united. You go into a mosque in this country, like Central Mosque, where there're people from everywhere, and you can see different ways of praying and dressing and doing wudu [ritual ablutions]... so there's diversity, but at the same time they're small differences and they don't break it [the unity, or overall system].

Thus, while some studies have discussed the complete rejection of individualism as part of the conversion process³⁹², the women interviewed during this research highlighted the attraction of embracing a community that can easily marry with living as an autonomous and independent individual. The attraction to a or *the* Muslim community has been recorded in other studies, an element in some conversions including love for the Muslim world, perhaps gained through visiting Muslim countries or having Muslim friends in

³⁹¹ Setta. E. 1999:339

³⁹² Allievi, S. 1999:291

the UK. Allievi describes this as *la voie relationelle*³⁹³ [i.e. the relational view] and suggests that it is a less common aspect in the conversions he studies. In contrast, the women interviewed here indicated that friendship and love for Muslims³⁹⁴ and their cultures or countries did play a role in attracting them to Islam. For example, Zh. described her relationship with Muslims prior to conversion:

I had loads of Muslim friends from different backgrounds... I've always been interested in different cultures, it's lovely to see the different ways people do things, the different foods, ways of dressing and behaving...

Participants spoke positively of the diversity of Muslims within a cross-cultural, cross-ethnic Islamic way of being³⁹⁵ articulated by the concept of Ummah. However, the women's views on the cultures of other Muslims were also complex. While the women participating found the cultural diversity of the Muslim community enriching and a positive feature, when talking about problems within the community women suggested that the root of the difficulties lay in cultural misinterpretations of religion. A.'s feelings reflected those of other participants:

One thing you quickly learn is that the Ummah isn't perfect. There are loads of crazy ideas out there, not just the Wahabi types but stupid cultural stuff. I mean look at honour killings. It's sick - when people think of Muslims they think of honour killings and forced marriages. And the sad thing is these things do happen and sometimes it's Muslims doing it. Cultural stuff and just plain crazy stuff gets mixed up. I mean I've even heard one... idiot... with my own ears, justifying beating his wife because he's Arab!! AstaghfirAllah [a term asking for forgiveness and often used to express disapproval and shock], the best of creation [the Prophet Muhammad] is Arab.

³⁹³ Setta. E. 1999:343; Sultan, M. 1999:327

³⁹⁴ García-Arenal, M. 1999:281; Setta. E. 1999:343

³⁹⁵ Allievi, S. 1999:292

S. spoke of negative cultural elements impacting on new converts, who she often taught:

You really wouldn't believe the things I've heard. New Muslims come here with such bad stories; sometimes I can't believe they're still Muslim the things they've been told are Islam. The problem is when there's a family who're ignorant and tell them all sorts of rubbish. I just have to start all over again and teach them properly.

This differentiation between Islamic and cultural practices has been illustrated previously by the women's views on feminism in Chapters 1 and 2. For example, participants spoke about the need for Muslim women to know their Islamic rights instead of following cultural norms that were sometimes viewed as un-Islamic and/or unacceptable culturally to the converts. In this context, the positive ideal and reality of the Ummah was contrasted with more negative realities within local communities.

Other studies have also highlighted ethnicity as an aspect of the conversion process, for example Daynes' research with African-American converts³⁹⁶, and the importance for some of these converts to re-engage with their Islamic heritage as part of the process of generating, transforming and affirming identity. While the majority of converts in this study were involved in the very opposite process, negotiating their new Muslim identities in a community where their ethnicity and culture is in a small minority, S.'s conversion could be analysed to some extent in this paradigm. S.'s birth father was Muslim, and her mother and stepfather converted to Islam when she was a child. However, S. did not convert to Islam until she was a teenager, when she felt she was ready to *accept Islam* as if returning to what was already part of her heritage and life.

³⁹⁶ Daynes, S. 1999:316, 317

Other studies of conversion to Islam have highlighted such life-strategy related factors as dissatisfaction with a weak, immoral and secular Western society³⁹⁷; an admiration and need for 'clear norms' and 'rules'³⁹⁸; and an attraction to notions of traditional³⁹⁹ behaviours which Köse views as 'a trend'⁴⁰⁰. However, these factors did not significantly feature in the views of women interviewed here.

Although *R.* criticised the environment of medical school which she felt pressured female students into sexualised roles, she did not suggest that this was a reason for her conversion to Islam. Rather, her comments were an observation that she was glad to be a practising Muslim refusing the social discourses and expectations that she felt *make educated, beautiful women flash their cleavage to sad old consultants*. It would be more accurate in this context to highlight a certain contempt for what many of the women felt were the negative impact *certain British norms are having on women*⁴⁰¹. *E.* also echoed this sentiment, saying,

I think the current fashion for 'ironic', post-feminist media, whether it's adverts on television or playboy t-shirts on young kids, is really sick. It's the same type of exploitation marketed as 'knowing cool', and women are still being objectified.

Similarly, *N.* said,

It's unbelievable how in 2005 we still have page 3 and a million grosser pictures out there like it's normal, as if its ok to sell things using women's bodies like we're flesh and nothing else. And the really annoying thing is that half of my friends think I'm mad getting angry about it. Islam is totally compatible with my views on this. Women shouldn't have to be naked to get further. How is that feminist or empowering?

³⁹⁷ Allievi, S. 1999:293,294; García-Arenal, M. 1999:281; Köse, A. 1999:303,305

³⁹⁸ Sultan, M. 1999:331

³⁹⁹ Daynes, S. 1999:317; Köse, A. 1999: 302, 305, 309,310

⁴⁰⁰ Köse, A. 1999:310

⁴⁰¹ words of *K.*

As discussed in other chapters, this feminist theme ran through the interviews, participants discussing Islamic attitudes to women and gender relations and their views on the cultural norms they had been brought up with. In this way, the Islamic alternatives were seen as attractive in a number of the conversions. As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, participants appreciated the awareness they had been given of gender roles as British women. While rejecting much of the 'British version'⁴⁰² of feminism, participants are particularly interested in feminist concepts including Islamic notions of gender⁴⁰³ and the assertion of rights and fluid roles.

For a number of women, marriage played a large part in the process of their conversion⁴⁰⁴. However, the secondary nature of this factor was made very explicit:

People who try to explain conversion to Islam by saying it's because of a man are talking rubbish. Yes, a woman might have that in mind [converting in relation to marrying a Muslim boyfriend⁴⁰⁵], but if she doesn't believe [in Islam] she won't be able to carry on. I've seen it happen loads of times.

In this last statement S. suggests that women who convert purely for the sake of marriage and without belief in Islam, do not maintain their 'conversion' for long. As the wife of a local imam and convert herself, S. is often introduced by members of the community to potential converts as a teacher and mentor.

In her experience, women whose interest in conversion is not founded on belief, particularly when faced with the cultural practices of in-laws, soon stop coming for lessons and often reject the idea of Islam altogether.

S. felt that in her particular town, male converts (the minority of the convert population of the town) appeared more devout in their belief and practice of Islam than women. She explained that this was

⁴⁰² words of K.

⁴⁰³ See other converts' interest in Sultan, M.1999:328

⁴⁰⁴ Setta. E. 1999.343; Sultan, M.1999:327

⁴⁰⁵ Sultan, M.1999:327

because they had come to the faith with their foundational and lived factors based on belief and spirituality, while more women - to her knowledge the majority of converts in the town - seemed to convert through life strategy, in these cases marriage. She felt that because such conversions are founded on life-strategy rather than belief, they were likely to leave Islam if their circumstances changed.

S. suggested that this apparent gender difference stemmed from the social patterns of the town. Muslim men mix more freely with non-Muslim women in the work place and social arena than Muslim women do with non-Muslim men. Hence, more women entered the conversion process, more dropped out and more were motivated by life strategy than spirituality. This theory is supported by two other participants from the same town. H. explained,

In this town you find a lot more women converting than men. I think it's probably because the Muslim men are in contact more with non-Muslim women in clubs and that, so then they go out and the women learn about Islam.

Confirming S. and H's ideas, Rh. said:

Some women just convert because they want to marry a Muslim man, because his family, even though they are allowed, won't let them marry a non-Muslim. So some of them convert for marriage, but they don't often last because it isn't about Islam, it's just about the man.

These statements also necessitate a differentiation between reasons that may be a factor in starting the process of conversion, or as one participant described, the 'path to Islam', and the reason that marked the actual embracing of Islam. The 'spark' of what is viewed as an *authentic* conversion is belief (which in turn is explained by *Hidayah*). However, in the pattern of events, the process of conversion may have started through motivation by a boyfriend to learn about Islam.

The above quotations also illustrate another commonality found during the fieldwork: women explicitly asserted that they had not converted 'because of a man'. Although a number described the role of a boyfriend as pivotal in their learning about Islam and/or motivation in the conversion process, all stressed that this was a secondary factor and not the root reason. Belief is viewed as the definition of authentic conversion: the suggestion that a convert has embraced Islam for another reason, and particularly the suggestion that it was under patriarchal influence is doubly rejected. There was a feeling that because family, friends and wider society regularly dismissed female conversion as the influence of men, there was a need to expel what is viewed as an insulting, anti-woman stance. Participants felt that their agency and authenticity as Muslims and feminists were questioned whenever this reason was suggested. As A. explained,

It's so insulting when the most major choice that you've ever made in your life, you know, becoming a Muslim, is dismissed by others as tagging along with someone, or to please your boyfriend, or because your husband's family expected it. People don't want to hear that you did it off your own back, after so much thought and worry and all the other things they don't want to imagine.

The roles of a woman and man within the context of Islamic marriage, as discussed in Chapter 2 were often described as important factors in embracing Islam. For the married women, ideas such as 'equal but different', 'freedom to be respected and honoured while working at home', 'not being expected to work inside or outside the home unless I choose to do so' demonstrated that marriage was seen as an important aspect of life. What is particularly interesting are the different interpretations or emphases that each woman gave to marriage.

A. described marriage in terms of the husband and wife's roles as sexual companions, R. described the freedom to work and study more than her husband, whom she felt would be more suited to

working in the home, while S. described her husband's role as provider while she remained 'queen of the home', valued and respected for bringing up and teaching her children. These examples demonstrate how the broad definition of Islamic marriage allows the concept to be attractive to a highly diverse set of individuals.

Islamic marriage was also seen as an attractive family framework. *Sh.*, *M.*, *Rh.*, *S.* and *A.* described themselves as family orientated. All were happily married to Muslim men who were born into the faith and were often involved with their in-laws to a large extent. *Sh.* and *S.* in particular spoke of the supportive environment that the extended family provided, with 'on-site' childcare, company and help with household work. *Sh.* felt that this enabled her to go out and work without feeling guilty as her sister-in-laws or mother-in-law were always willing to look after them.

This view of family life as harmonious and secure was not without its more negative points. The women pointed out that Muslim marriages and family life were subject to the same strains that any other family might be, and that extended families have a number of different issues to those of a nuclear family, such as a lack of privacy or spending time with relatives with whom they do not necessarily get on. *A.* joked at her animosity to a critical sister-in-law who she could not avoid seeing on a regular basis in her own home - *she drives me mad, never stops asking why I'm not pregnant* - while *S.* talked about her frustration with a sister-in-law who did not, in her opinion, assert herself enough within her marriage,

she's so frustrating, I keep telling her to tell him what's what, he'll never learn, and neither will his mother, if she just quietly takes it all the time.

The women who had or were intending at some point in the future to have children also spoke of the high esteem in which mothers are

held in Islam⁴⁰⁶. Several participants quoted the *hadith* in which the mother is honoured three times before the father, and A., while talking about the role of women in Islam in general terms mentioned the martyrdom of women who die in childbirth,

there are so many different forms of martyrdom, it's extended to all struggles, including for the women who die in childbirth.

M. and S. also talked about motherhood being valued in Islam and by Muslims much more than in non-Muslim, British culture, S. saying:

The role of motherhood isn't taken for granted like I feel it is for women in our society, a person has to really honour their mother.

Although no one suggested that the high rank of a mother triggered their conversion, it was seen as a positive factor for women converting to Islam.

A number of studies highlight conversions triggered by active political beliefs and a rejection of 'Western' society⁴⁰⁷. This is the convert who seeks an alternative and opposite position to the West in a reductionist, politically motivated interpretation of Islam, where heterogeneity is replaced with homogeneity, and the concept of *Jihad*⁴⁰⁸ is reduced to violence against any perceived enemy. In these studies, such a convert is viewed as deviant⁴⁰⁹, a social outsider⁴¹⁰ desiring to become the Other⁴¹¹ (Islam highlighted as alien), of wanting to create a new identity⁴¹² and joining a different community of ideas and ideals⁴¹³.

⁴⁰⁶ Sultan, M. 1999:327

⁴⁰⁷ Wohlrab-Sahr, M. 1999:361; Daynes, S. 1999:314

⁴⁰⁸ Allievi, S. 1999:292

⁴⁰⁹ Köse, A. 1999:303

⁴¹⁰ Allievi, S. 1999:293

⁴¹¹ García-Arenal, M. 1999:281

⁴¹² Köse, A. 1999:303

⁴¹³ Allievi, S. 1999:292,293, 294; Daynes, S. 1999:317

This conversion 'type' is seen as a form of social protest where the 'West' and globalisation⁴¹⁴ are viewed as the oppressor⁴¹⁵, against which the convert may fight with words and ideas, or physically through *Jihad*. The individual therefore finds religio-political⁴¹⁶ empowerment⁴¹⁷ through their interpretation of Islam, the title of an article, 'Jihadis in the Hood'⁴¹⁸ describing the situation perfectly. This scenario was presented to me by a senior policeman during the period of research, his surprise at my 'normality' contrasting with his understanding of converts as disenfranchised, uneducated young men with vengeance on society in mind.

Such a view of conversion is not relevant to the individuals here, but in providing what participants see as a stereotype of converts based on a tiny, usually male, minority, it contrasts dramatically with the picture the women have of themselves and Islam. While the women draw on ideals of Islam that attracted them in the process of conversion, it could easily be assumed that the ideals of some, as described here, could have put them off conversion. However, this does not seem to be the case. A. summarises the explanations that participants gave in reaction to such images:

In a way, I think these horrific stories make people look closer at Islam - if you're interested in learning about Islam then you'll search for answers, you won't believe that this is normal behaviour... perhaps stories like this mean that people's attention is caught and they find out for themselves...

R. talked specifically about the terrorist attacks on New York:

It's funny, you'd think 9/11 would have put people off, but I heard now there are more people becoming Muslim,

⁴¹⁴ Daynes, S. 1999:318

⁴¹⁵ Daynes, S. 1999:313, 320, 322

⁴¹⁶ Allievi, S. 1999:293

⁴¹⁷ Allievi, S. 1999:292

⁴¹⁸ Aidi, H. 2002

especially women. I think it's because people are bothering to find out.

The participants in this study were not attracted by the political activities and religious interpretations of militant groups, and for some of them, negative images ultimately contributed in a positive way to the conversion process. Similarly, other negative images of Islam include K.'s negative preconceptions about the status of women in Islam. This caused her to find out more as part of the conversion process:

Actually, when I first heard about Islam from friends, I was really suspicious about the whole women thing. But I asked loads of questions and found that actually women are very strong in Islam. But that was the thing that put me off when I didn't know.

What may have had a negative impact on a convert is actually an important or at least useful part of her conversion process.

Conversion to Islam is an ongoing and complex process that cannot be described as mono-causal. Islam as a belief system and way of life attracts diverse individuals through its multifaceted appeal⁴¹⁹. The converts in this study draw upon various ideals, described by Daynes as 'ideal-typical modes of identification with Islam... blended in many different combinations'⁴²⁰, and realities of Islam and Muslim life.

As described by the converts themselves, the process can be viewed as an interplay between the foundational belief in the tenets of Islam brought about by faith and ultimately *Hidayah*, with various other facets that may attract an individual. These secondary factors may be spiritual or strategic to 'worldly' life. Feminism's embracing of diversity complements such an analysis: it is important that the choice women make in their conversions is recognised and

⁴¹⁹ Allievi, S. 1999:293

⁴²⁰ Daynes, S. 1999:313

supported, rather than dismissed as delusion. The participants in this study were active, and, in the broadest sense, educated agents of the conversion process, not passive receptacles of ideas or behaviours.

Chapter 5: Identities

As indicated in the previous chapter, the participants' conversions marked the beginning of a whole set of processes, their choice to embrace and practice Islam initiating the forcible interaction of opposing discourses. This chapter will attempt to investigate the collision in terms of the primary concern and tool of these discourses: the notion of identity.

'Identity', the way we define ourselves and others define us, is a key concept in understanding social interactions, particularly the lines of power running through various regulatory discourses and the contrasting lived realities of individuals. It will be argued that the socialities producing such discourses attempt to assert power by promoting static constructions of identity that signify the belonging or rejection of groups and individuals to and from that sociality. When the boundaries of the discourses are crossed - as the act of conversion simultaneously allows and forces the women in this research to do - the perceptions by others and of themselves are altered. That is, the transitions women make through the conversion process - in addition to the collision of discourses - impact on identities. As Ghazal Read and Bartkowski assert,

*Discourses are not discrete ideologies; rather, they are culturally specific modes of understanding the world that intersect with competing viewpoints.*⁴²¹

Within regulatory discourses, typical labels of identity such as 'race', nationality, culture and faith are used in an attempt to regulate and categorise. The fixed identity models that are subsequently produced more often than not contrast starkly with women's lived experiences. In reality, women such as the participants in this study negotiate their identities with fluidity, crossing and blurring the boundaries of different cultures, nationality and Ummah, while handling the ascriptions of others in differing ways. It is important to

⁴²¹ Ghazal Read, J. & Bartkowski, J.P. 2000: 397

note that the identities under discussion are those relating to participants as Muslims / British / converts / women, and does not attempt to explore the constant production of their identities as a whole.

Commonly used terms of identity such as 'ethnicity' and 'race' are, in different contexts, modes of creating, reproducing or deleting aspects of difference. They are often used as static, unquestionable categories, a legacy of structuralist theories that viewed sociality as a series of natural 'social facts'⁴²². Alternatively, they can be viewed, through a more post-modern lens, as subjective social constructions that are used as political tools in the power-laden discourses of identity politics. Whether constructed in terms of ethnicity, race or religion, identity is the way in which individuals and groups project or are ascribed boundaries.

For example, in the context of a nation state there is at any given time a dominant group whose values are promoted and internalised as the accepted structure - norms - of society⁴²³. As identities also represent the entitlements to resources and power⁴²⁴, the dominant group promotes its identity and values over those of the less powerful. This imbalance of power⁴²⁵ is reflected in the subordination of people excluded from the group and outside the boundaries - the Others. Thus, notions of difference and sameness are often used by members of a dominant group in its political strategy⁴²⁶, such as political interest in immigration.

In Britain this process is produced through the promotion, at times explicitly, but in general through the assertion of subtle norms, of an essentialised and racialised nationhood, the dominant group identifying itself, implicitly and exclusively, as White, Anglo-Saxon (generally assumed to be English), and Protestant⁴²⁷. This discourse

⁴²² Durkheim, E. (1895) 1964

⁴²³ Khan, V.S. 1987 in Husband, C. 1987:213

⁴²⁴ Papanek, H. 1994 in Moghadam, V. 1994:42

⁴²⁵ Khan, V.S. 1987 in Husband, C. 1987

⁴²⁶ Bhavani, K. & Phoenix, A. 1994:183 citing Brah, A. 1991:58

⁴²⁷ Wallace, W. 1991:65

is also viewed as having a strong male bias. Nations are often feminised⁴²⁸, referred to by the feminine pronoun and associated with symbolic female figures such as, in the case of Britain, Britannia, Boudicca and 'the English Rose'. Yet, these symbols and associated 'fictitious ethnicities' bear little relevance to the women living within that society⁴²⁹.

Ifekwunigwe has described this discourse as the 'bi-racialised English society' in which the hegemonic viewpoint divides people into Black and White, 'British subjects and English natives'⁴³⁰. While useful, this point should not be allowed to obscure the complexities. There are many layers of sociality and discourse within and between the social relations that produce 'complex hierarchies of subordination and domination at all levels of society'⁴³¹.

However, it can be concluded that the discourses have created an atmosphere in which métissage⁴³² is refused space - one must be Black or White in all aspects of identity. It is within this context that a 'white', English Muslim becomes a problematic concept: according to the dominant regulating discourse she is a contradiction in terms.

In discussing identity it is important to make a distinction between the ways an individual or group self-identifies, and the ways that others identify that individual or group. As will be further explored, self-identification is a fluid and constant production⁴³³ of different strands -identities- through which a person experiences and defines herself. They may be roles, beliefs, attributes, and they may be altered, diminished, abandoned or highlighted⁴³⁴ according to circumstance and time. In contrast, the way other people identify and define an individual or group may involve much more fixed, reductionist categories that may or may not coincide with an

⁴²⁸ Mun Wong, Lai. M. 1994:212 in Bahvani, K. & Phoenix, A. 1994

⁴²⁹ Afshar, H., Aitken, R. & Franks, M. 2004:7 including quote from Radcliffe & Westwood 1993

⁴³⁰ Ifekwunigwe, J. 1999 in Barot, R. Bradley, H. & Fenton, S. 1999:206-209

⁴³¹ Ramazanoglu, C. 1989:122

⁴³² Ifekwunigwe, J. 1999 in Barot, R. Bradley, H. & Fenton, S. 1999:207

⁴³³ Afshar, H. Aitken, R. & Franks, M. 2004; Barth, F. 1994; Fischer-Rosenthal, W. 1995; Ghorashi, H. 2003; Hekman, S. 2000; Stanford Friedman, S. 1995:17

⁴³⁴ Hekman, S. 2000:294

individual's self-identification. An interesting point is the notion of restriction. As Afshar, Aitkin and Franks have argued, self-definition is not unrestricted - the construction of identities are constrained by socio/political/personal circumstances⁴³⁵. It may be further reasoned that the limits to this restriction are stretched by the violation of the norms that set them, a violation that would lead to the possible ascription of 'madness'.

This interaction and the differences between self-identification and ascription, are a source of power. As the subject of ascription, people cannot avoid the impact, positive or negative, of other people's/ a community's/ society's view of them and must experience that impact, whether or not they choose to actively engage in challenging or confirming those ascriptions. The power becomes even more potent when a majority ascribes various identities to a minority, particularly if they are negative. Therefore, identity should not be viewed as a natural or valueless concept.

This is why the recognition of ascribed and adopted / projected / produced identities is vital: Yuval-Davis points out that at any one time an individual or group in the UK may be viewed as "Paki", 'Black Asian' and 'Muslim fundamentalists'⁴³⁶ but feel alien to any of these labels and multiple meanings, rather self-identifying with another highly diverse range of labels. In this case, the women participating in this study shared a commonality with those adopting/ascribed other hyphenated British identities, although the experiences of, for example British Jews, or British African-Caribbean individuals are situated in their own sets of circumstances and positions⁴³⁷. This recognition of the reality of identities, that they are complex and ever changing, and the assertion that forms of ascription are tools of power has been an important development in feminism and post-structuralist theories.

⁴³⁵ Afshar, H. Aitken, R. & Franks, M. 2004.

⁴³⁶ Yuval-Davis 1994 in Bhavnani, K. & Phoenix, A. 1994:183

⁴³⁷ See for example, Barot, R. (ed) 1993

The dominant identities are asserted as an implicit, invisible norm, embedded in the social fabric, and fortified by cultural avenues such as the law and media, and simultaneously strengthened by the explicit construction of minorities as deviant Others⁴³⁸. It is the invisibility of the norm that increases its power: dominant 'Whiteness' for example, is an absent concept⁴³⁹, only visible by its contrast to the Other who must be by default non-White / non-Anglo-Saxon / non-Christian⁴⁴⁰.

There exists an unquestioned political notion of White Identity, defined by melding a particular skin colour, culture, ethnicity and religion. This is, as Cohen describes, a way of unifying a group through symbolically constructed communal identity⁴⁴¹ and is itself a reductionist and inaccurate ascription / self-identification of Britishness used by the few to hijack the majority for political ends.

Franks⁴⁴², Anthias and Yuval-Davis have illustrated this by pointing out the religious Whiteness enshrined in British law, in that the head of state is also head of the national Churches, the Prime Minister is necessarily Christian too⁴⁴³ and that blasphemy laws apply only in terms of Christianity⁴⁴⁴.

Through the same frame, successive governments talk in terms of 'race or ethnic relations', 'Black youth', 'assimilation' and more recently 'social-cohesion'. Post-9/11 there is a strong discourse of ascription in which Muslims are a homogenous racial group of immigrants to be feared and regulated. For example, an article in *The Sunday Times*⁴⁴⁵ attempts to instil fear in the reader by suggesting that hordes of fascist Muslims are invading Europe to wage an 'Islamic cultural takeover'⁴⁴⁶. This may be unsurprising in

⁴³⁸ Anthias & Yuval-Davis 1992:19-22; Westwood, S & Bhachu, P. 1988. 1

⁴³⁹ Mun Wong, L 1994 in Bhavnani, K. & Phoenix, A. 1994:133

⁴⁴⁰ Colley, L. 1992:311

⁴⁴¹ Colley, L. 1992:309; Cohen, A. 1985:intro.

⁴⁴² Franks, M. 2000:925

⁴⁴³ Disraeli, was baptised into the Church of England at the age of 13 (1817). Spector, S.A. 2005: *Critical Introduction* para.4

⁴⁴⁴ Anthias, F. & Yuval-Davis, N. 1992:53-55

⁴⁴⁵ Moynahan, B. 2005

⁴⁴⁶ Moynahan, B. 2005:42

light of Cohen's analysis that the colonial chapters of British history have made racism 'constitutive of what has come to be known as the 'British way of life''⁴⁴⁷. Whiteness, equated with Englishness i.e. the dominant British identity, is defined most clearly in contrast to the Other⁴⁴⁸. For example the convert to Islam, as participants repeatedly mentioned, is perceived to have 'taken on another culture', or 'foreign ways', despite perhaps feeling as 'English' as she ever did and the colour of her skin remaining the same. This will be illustrated later in this chapter but is summarised by Zh. who asserted,

It's amazing, from your friends and family to the random man on the street, it's as if embracing Islam had turned me into another person completely. Suddenly I'm seen as foreign, but apart from my religion, I'm not different at all.

The different notions of 'Englishness' differ whether they are ascribed or self-defined. A useful if extreme example is the British National Party, a representative of which told me during research that being a Muslim, despite being 'white' and British, renders a person incompatible with being British.

Religious affiliation is also fused to this fixed, racialised identity in an equation where White is Christian⁴⁴⁹ and the Other is non-White and/or non-Christian⁴⁵⁰. Within this dichotomy a Muslim cannot be White, the dominant discourse is not flexible enough for what it views as a contradictory identity. In such a case, like all transgressors of a powerful norm, a group or individual may be ignored or suffer hostility both socially and legally.

The insistence on fused, fixed identities is particularly adverse to people who make a distinction between their ethnicity and their

⁴⁴⁷ Colley, L. 1992; Anthias, F. & Yuval-Davis, N. 1992:40 citing Cohen, P. 1988:3

⁴⁴⁸ Delgado, R. & Stefancic, J. 1997

⁴⁴⁹ Brah, A, 1996:2,3

⁴⁵⁰ in 1970, eight out of ten Britons stated that the Christian identity of Britain is 'very important' or 'important' to them. Anthias, F. & Yuval-Davis, N. 1992:53

religion⁴⁵¹. For Muslims in Britain the negative dominant stereotypes of Orientalism are ingrained. The image of the East - and in this discourse, Muslims can only be from 'The East' - has been the negative print to Britishness⁴⁵²: the backward to British modernity, violence to British peace, sexual barbarism to British civilisation⁴⁵³. Such discourses use fabricated images⁴⁵⁴ of the Muslim woman in order to attack and discredit Islam and Muslims in general, these images changing, according to time and place, from invisible and docile victim to potentially violent aggressor, from traditional chattel to vociferous and lamentable sign of modernity and globalisation's worst features. Each aspect of this discourse thus otherises the convert⁴⁵⁵.

Feminism has been subject to its own internal hierarchies and power struggles over identity, with certain feminisms criticised for their unquestioned affiliation to White, middle-class, Euro-American and Christian identities⁴⁵⁶. Reflecting the dominant discourses of their own socialities, dominant feminisms have failed, amongst others, Muslim women. Khan for example, relays the situation of Muslim women in Canada who,

*are silenced, ignored and oppressed, not only by structures and institutions, but also by the very social movement whose legitimisation is largely derived from its opposition to oppression, namely feminism.*⁴⁵⁷

This reference alludes to the dominant feminisms whose exclusivity, as has been noted in Chapters 1 and 2 of this thesis, resulted in a backlash and subsequent birth of alternative feminism such as Black and other non-White feminisms⁴⁵⁸, that seek to fill the gaps for those in the grey spectrum who have been described as belonging to

⁴⁵¹ Jacobson, J. 1997:238

⁴⁵² Said, E. 1978:1-2

⁴⁵³ Colley, L. 1992:324; Nuhoglu Soysal, Y. 1997:509

⁴⁵⁴ Zayzafoon, L.B.Y. 2005:1-14 & 31-64

⁴⁵⁵ Franks, M. 2000:926

⁴⁵⁶ Bhavnani, K. & Phoenix, A. 1994:7-8

⁴⁵⁷ Abdo, N. 1993:74 in Khan, S. 2000:17

⁴⁵⁸ Anthias, F. & Yuval-Davis, N. 1983 in Lovell, T. 1990:104

Bhabha's 'unhomely'⁴⁵⁹. For Muslim and non-Muslim women, Islamic feminism may be seen as capable of providing an acceptable, alternative framework to the dominant discourse that has failed them, including 'white', Muslim converts in Britain⁴⁶⁰, the majority of whom are female, come from diverse backgrounds⁴⁶¹ and whose identities, like many women, are highly contested.

In this vein, Islamic and other feminisms provide a 'liminal space'⁴⁶², a place for those 'betwixt and between'⁴⁶³ in which the notion of a human 'yearning for rigidity' as described by Douglas⁴⁶⁴ can be challenged. As participants discussed, this aspect of Islamic feminism may be particularly useful to Muslims including converts in Britain, the majority of whom are female, who come from diverse backgrounds⁴⁶⁵ and whose identities, like many women, are highly contested.

These are the 'contradictory' identities of the insider/outsider or hybrid⁴⁶⁶ whose 'fitting in' alters with context. Theorists have found ways to describe the diverse forms of adopting, blending, fusing, producing of and moving between identities, from hyphenating to syncretism and crossing⁴⁶⁷. These processes are recognised along with the right to new identities, of refusing conformity and embracing the possibility of change⁴⁶⁸. The women are not outlaw hybrids exiled to the borders of fixed identity norms and belonging nowhere⁴⁶⁹. Instead, as will be explored further in this chapter, they create their own 'third spaces', free planes in which they construct

⁴⁵⁹ Rapport, N. & Overing, J. 2000:363 citing Bhabha, H. 1994

⁴⁶⁰ Birt, Y. quoted in *The Sunday Times*, February 22, 2004:5 suggests that there are over 14 000 converts, although the 2001 Census suggests that 4% of Muslims in Britain are of white British origin:

(www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=957).

There are about 1.6 million Muslims, 2.8-3% of the whole population:

(www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=954)

⁴⁶¹ Abdel Haleem, H. 2003 in Jawad, H. & Benn, T. 2003: 92, 93

⁴⁶² Khan, S. 2000:129

⁴⁶³ Overing, J. & Rapport, N. 2000:229

⁴⁶⁴ Overing, J. & Rapport, N. 2000:231 citing Douglas, M. 1966:162

⁴⁶⁵ Abdel Haleem, H. 2003 in Jawad, H. & Benn, T. 2003:92, 93

⁴⁶⁶ Khan, S. 2000:130; Bhabha, H. 1990; Haraway, D. 1990; Bauman 1995,

⁴⁶⁷ Overing, J. 1985:14; Vertovec, S. & Rogers, A. 1998:6, 8

⁴⁶⁸ Khan, S. 1998; Vertovec, S. & Rogers, A. 1998:2

⁴⁶⁹ Orlando, V. 1999:29-30

their own fluid identities⁴⁷⁰. As Orlando so beautifully describes, each third space is,

*both a mediating milieu in the middle of established paradigms of culture, identity and language, and a transcended beyond that leads to new beginnings and perceptions. It is in this outside space where existing ideologies concerning femininity, masculinity, Islam, the East, and the West may be negotiated.*⁴⁷¹

In addressing their own power imbalances, feminist and post-modern movements have worked to unpack and interrogate those dominant norms and insist on a recognition of diversity, accepting that identities are complex and heterogeneous. Through this process, previously 'invisible' norms have been exposed to allow analysis and a possibility of subversion, resulting is the creation of spaces for a multiple and overlapping politics of identity. Authors have demonstrated that boundaries of identity are not fixed, but permeable and shifting, along with the racisms that accompany them⁴⁷².

Rather than adhering to some overarching self-producing Identity, individuals and groups constantly produce and renegotiate their view of self and consequently their view of others⁴⁷³. In addition, individuals are not bound to membership with one group: multiple and changing membership is the reality for most people⁴⁷⁴. Neither is multiple membership necessarily 'coherent'⁴⁷⁵ - identities may appear contradictory and are often situational⁴⁷⁶. That feminism can recognise and accept this chaotic tapestry of identity empowers groups and individuals, and subverts the power of the dominant discourse and its promotion of a false, fixed hierarchy of belonging.

⁴⁷⁰ Orlando, V. 1999:154

⁴⁷¹ Orlando, V. 1999:109-110

⁴⁷² Khan, V.S. 1987. in Husband, C. 1987; Bhavnani, K. & Phoenix, A. 1994:5

⁴⁷³ Eley, G. and Sunny, R.G. 1996:10; Khan, V.S. 1987 in Husband, C. 1987:215

⁴⁷⁴ Yuval-Davis, N. 1994 in Bhavnani, K. & Phoenix, A. 1994:184

⁴⁷⁵ Vertovec, S. & Rogers, A. 1998:1

⁴⁷⁶ Dwyer, C. 1999:6

Feminist interpretations of identity politics are therefore located in the wider framework of the 'new politics of difference'⁴⁷⁷ that has enabled Others, as Hall describes, 'to re-claim and re-(in)state their own subjectivities and to dispel the myths that have been perpetuated by their dominating groups'⁴⁷⁸. These Others include Muslim women to whom dominant discourses, as has been described, ascribe static and stereotyped racial and ethnic identities, along with notions of 'tradition', victimisation and backwardness.

Part of this model is the portrayal of Islam as anti-modern and oppressive⁴⁷⁹; the need for Muslim women to dispel such ascription affirmed by the fact that women are finding Islam to be 'a source of strength and resistance to sexism and patriarchy'⁴⁸⁰. Feminism within and from the Islamic framework offers a feminist alternative, feminism's subversive, destabilising effect on power an important tool. Homogenisation is a divisive way of asserting power in a discourse of 'Them versus Us'⁴⁸¹ and for homogenised and dominated groups such as women and Muslims in Britain, feminist discourses can be a way of reclaiming or neutralising the effect of this power as described in Chapters 1 and 2⁴⁸².

The women involved in this research are situated precariously at shifting intersections of these competing 'regulating discourses'⁴⁸³ of identity and power. A 'white', British woman who converts to Islam crosses a number of boundaries which are portrayed as impassable⁴⁸⁴. As women pre-conversion, they have experienced domination within British society yet as 'white skinned' citizens they were members of the dominant, most powerful group. Their pre-Islamic beliefs were either Christian, atheist or agnostic: also norms

⁴⁷⁷ Wong, LM 1994 quoting Wilpert, C. 1989:6 in Bhavnani, K. & Phoenix, A. 1994:134

⁴⁷⁸ Wong, L.M. 1994 citing Hall 1988:27 in Bhavnani, K. & Phoenix, A. 1994:134

⁴⁷⁹ Pedersen, L. 1998 in Vertovec, S. & Rogers, A. 1998:78

⁴⁸⁰ Vertovec, S. & Rogers, A. 1998:11 c.f. Knott, K. and Khokher, S. 1993; Haw, K. & Parker; Jenkins, M. 1996

⁴⁸¹ Helie, A. 2000:31

⁴⁸² Khan, S. 2000:129

⁴⁸³ The Foucauldian concept of 'regulating discourses' is very useful in the discussion of identities, as demonstrated by Khan, S. 1998 in the context of Muslim women.

⁴⁸⁴ Franks, M. 2000:918; Maynard, M. 1994:21

in the dominant section of British society. Through their conversions to Islam, they have simultaneously crossed boundaries yet retained many of their pre-conversion identities. On one hand, they are still 'white' British citizens, yet on the other they have become members of an often reviled⁴⁸⁵ minority group – Muslims - and therefore hold a contradictory status according to dominant narratives. As will be demonstrated, the ascribed identities contrast markedly with their self-identifications which are seen as contradictory within the various regulating discourses⁴⁸⁶.

The discourses are involved in the manipulation of power, some explicitly political, and they use identity politics as a tool with which to regulate people. Within such a racist discourse, where minorities are ascribed as alien/irrational/uncivilised- i.e. the complementary oppositions of the dominant majority's self-definitions⁴⁸⁷, those who are marginalised struggle for power. Thus, a common response is for competing parties to endeavour to use identity politics by asserting their minority status and difference.

However, for minorities, using such a tool i.e. that of the dominating, has limited application. As Hekman argues in her critique of identity politics, as soon as a movement uses an identity to promote itself, that identity becomes fixed and in turn used against the people it claims to represent by a dominant discourse exploiting notions of difference⁴⁸⁸. The women in this study do not identify in a homogenous manner, instead demonstrating how easily the power of ascription is subverted, how they identify themselves over time and place, and how as people positioned somewhere in-between majorities and minorities, they show up the false-categories of power.

Individual and group identities are intrinsically linked to their histories, and as such, regulatory discourses attempt to erase these histories. In the case of a convert, her shift from being perceived as

⁴⁸⁵ Afshar, H. Aitken, R. & Franks, M. 2004:13

⁴⁸⁶ Afshar, H. 1994; Khan, S. 1998

⁴⁸⁷ Troyna, B. 1987 in Husband 1987:275-289

⁴⁸⁸ Hekman, S. 2000:296, 297

conforming to the dominant identity and thus accepted as a member of the norm, to being viewed as an Other is in part achieved by the refusal to recognise her history. Drawing on the feminist ideas of diversity and the constant forging of new identities, the power in such an excluding model is revealed. Identity is *generated* from histories - the intermingling or even collision⁴⁸⁹ of group and individual histories. As such, the feminist theory allows for shifting and adding to a life narrative. In contrast, the dominant view may be that she is in fact taking away or replacing a history/identity, as some studies of conversion mentioned in previous chapters have demonstrated⁴⁹⁰.

For example, Daynes⁴⁹¹ and Wohlrab-Sahr⁴⁹² both suggest that conversion is part of an overall identity problem, where a social misfit rejects their 'own' identity for that of an unobtainable or 'inauthentic' foreign identity as a form of social protest. The static model suggests a sudden detachment from history: that a person may join anOther history and keep their own as well, ruptures the norm and highlights the complex boundaries of identities. It also reveals the often unquestioned notions of 'Whiteness', whether ascribed, projected, adopted or forged, something that, while living in very different circumstances, Muslim converts in countries other than Britain may experience.

Elements of conversion - rejection and adoption - are magnified and polarised as an explanation of conversion's 'function'. The result is that a woman may be faced with hostility, perceived as a 'race traitor' or as a member of another 'race'/culture altogether⁴⁹³. For example, during a group discussion S., H. and Sh. described the reactions of strangers:

⁴⁸⁹ Khan, V.S. 1987 in Husband, C. 1987; Bhavnani, K. & Phoenix, A. 1994:21

⁴⁹⁰ Allievi, S. 1999:292-294; Daynes, S. 1999:314, 317; García-Arenal, M. 1999:281; Köse, A.; 1999:303; Wohlrab-Sahr, M. 1999:361

⁴⁹¹ Daynes, S. 1999:322

⁴⁹² Wohlrab-Sahr, M. 1999:352-353

⁴⁹³ Franks, M. 2000:926

S. *Around here, where there's a lot of racism, it's normal to get people, kids but usually adults to shout 'white paki' ...*

Sh. *Yes, either that or 'effing terrorist' ...*

H. *... or if you're not wearing hijab like me, and you're with Muslims who are, they tend to shout 'effing Paki lover' instead*

These examples illustrate the racialisation and demonisation of Muslims, and the perceived disloyalty if an insider, i.e. 'white' woman, is seen socialising with Others.

Less vocal but equally harmful are examples of Islamophobic rejection and ascription as described by A.:

When people have worked out you're actually British, and not as they assume at first, 'foreign' which is a word said in a certain way, they start asking so many questions. Basically it's almost unbelievable that some white British girl would become Muslim. They usually say, 'Oh are you married? Did your husband force you?' because that's the only acceptable possibility for them.

Similarly, R. said:

Sometimes you get women who think they're real feminists asking you about it [being Muslim/converting] and they can hardly hide their disgust. You know the sort of stuff: 'but why Islam, when it oppresses women?' or 'but Islam's so alien'...

Such prejudice is derived directly from the dominant regulating discourse described above, successfully disseminated through individuals.

The second type of regulating discourse which ascribes reductionist identities to the participants of this study and other Muslims, claims

to be from *within*, rather than from outside the Muslim community, speaking *for* rather than about the Muslim community. Khan, in her discussion of identity politics and Muslim women refers to these two particularly relevant 'regulating discourses of Islam and Orientalism'⁴⁹⁴ which she subsequently alters to Orientalism and 'Islamism'⁴⁹⁵. Khan continues by defining her notion of Islam/Islamism as a regulating discourse as the political-religious movements found within the Muslim community. I would like to move away from using the terms 'Islam' and 'Islamism' as if they are interchangeable, and be specific in defining exactly what ascription from within the Muslim community constitutes, as the women in this study and others view Islam as a source of liberation which they choose to follow and identify.

It will be argued that the notion of regulating discourses does not mean that the discourses manage to regulate people. While these social forces are a form of power, their nature as power allows the possibility of resistance⁴⁹⁶. The women who participated in this study accommodate their various and changing ascribed and adopted identities with great fluidity. That is, the identities that participants adopt and the identities ascribed to them by regulating discourses are used, manipulated and rejected by each individual in any number of ways over time and in differing situations.

Participants who spoke of a disquiet with certain discourses associated with the Muslim community specified both political and doctrinal orientated groups: 'Wahabis'⁴⁹⁷; 'HT'⁴⁹⁸, an abbreviation of Hizb-ut-Tahrir⁴⁹⁹; and certain mosques in which attendants espouse

⁴⁹⁴ Khan, S. 1998:463

⁴⁹⁵ Khan, S. 1998:468

⁴⁹⁶ Foucault, M. 1979 *Lectures at Stanford University* in Faubion, J. D. 2002:324

⁴⁹⁷ Mentioned by K, Z, M

⁴⁹⁸ Mentioned by S, A,

⁴⁹⁹ 'Hizb-ut-Tahrir' means 'Party of Liberation', a name which highlights its goal to take over the entire global community of Muslims: *to revive the Islamic Ummah from the severe decline that it had reached, and to liberate it from the thoughts, systems and laws of Kufr, as well as the domination and influence of the Kufr states. It also aims to restore the Islamic Khilafah State so that the ruling by what Allah (swt) revealed returns.*

See <http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org/english/english.html> under subheading 'The Reasons for the Establishment of Hizb ut-Tahrir'

the teachings of writers such as Mawdudi and Qutb ⁵⁰⁰. For example, K. talked about meetings that she had attended in her local area which were

...stuffed full of Salafi types. I keep away from them now... I find them so controlling and narrow.

Describing different groups in her area A. said,

... And then there's H.T., have you ever seen a load of boys so obsessed by mortgages?!... and totally ridiculous ideas about an H.T. caliphate!!... The sad thing is, they're the ones that march round town and give out leaflets. I've even seen bumper stickers on cars with their name on...

Z. mentioned her worry about political writings and the influences on Mosques:

When I first converted I read loads of books, but after a while I started noticing some really different, scary ideas. Some of them were full of these sick Wahabi ideas, anthropomorphic... I even read one talking about the 'feet of Allah' I mean that's disgusting, it contradicts basic Islam... and there were other books that quoted a lot from Sayed Qutb and Mawdudi. In fact the local mosque is full of that sort of literature. When you look into all this it's really worrying... the ideas behind some of it are dangerous and the sad thing is, they've infiltrated all over the place.

Although these groups are distinct in their outlooks and aims, they share a commonality through the defining of very specific and constricted boundaries of what constitutes a Muslim and the boundaries in which a Muslim should operate. By attaching their minority political and/or religious based agendas to majority Islamic beliefs and practices, these groups attempt to legitimise their narrow

⁵⁰⁰ Mentioned by Rh. & Z.

definitions of 'pure Islam' and 'ideal Muslim'. For example, by using the name *Salafi*, the title given to the companions of the Prophet Muhammad and those who lived within the first three hundred years after his death, these groups claim a stake in a glorious past while promoting their views as authentic.

Similarly, H.T. attaches its aim to create its own version of a worldwide Islamic state within which Muslims would act and believe in accordance with its marginal doctrine, by drawing on the concept of *Ummah* - the global Muslim community⁵⁰¹. While the concept and reality of the *Ummah* are held dear to Muslims, the majority does not share H.T.'s vision of 'unification' and 'cleansing'. Their unclear stance on 'Britishness', in which a Muslim may be 'culturally' British and live in Britain⁵⁰² while simultaneously having a duty to 'struggle against Kufr colonialist states'⁵⁰³ including Britain, ascribes its own definitions of Muslim and national identities to both individuals and the entire Muslim community.

Other groups place great emphasis on details such as the dress codes of the ideal Muslim, particularly women, who must be identified by a very specific, modern Arabized dress combination such as *jilbab / khimar / niqab*⁵⁰⁴ in dark colours. Here the discourse takes the concept of dress-codes and modesty and narrows them until there is only one ascription and one self-identification, a reduced and static Ideal Muslimah⁵⁰⁵. In reality, hijab is a complex and contested subject which is defined differently by individuals, groups, cultures and times within the Muslim community, as will be explored in the next chapter.

⁵⁰¹ See www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org/english/english.html; Afshar, H. Aitken, R. & Franks, M. 2004:1

⁵⁰² H.T. 2004

⁵⁰³ See www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org/english/english.html under the section on political aims.

⁵⁰⁴ This particular form of hijab grew popular in the 1970's as a uniform of the disenfranchised middle classes of Egypt and other Middle Eastern countries for whom movements such as the 'Muslim Brotherhood' provided a new political discourse based on ideas of an ideal Islamic state y propounded by Qutb for example. See in particular El Guindi 1999:134136

⁵⁰⁵ *Muslimah* specifies the Muslim as female

Thus for example, the polarized discourses that Muslim women are subjected to on the subject of hijab, whether the notion that hijab is an oppressive, anti-feminist, backward and alien symbol or the only and most important symbol of ideal Muslim womanhood, fail to comprehend or allow the complexities surrounding the reality of the issue. The participants in this study demonstrated differing ideas about what constitutes hijab, how they did or did not wear it and the reasons behind their choices. Their understandings of identity in relation to hijab did not conform to static ascriptions, rather challenged and subverted them, a subject discussed further in Chapter 6.

To a lesser extent, participants also felt pressure from discourses of 'tradition', the expectations of which they felt were foisted upon cradle Muslims to an even greater degree, particularly by older members of their communities⁵⁰⁶. These discourses were seen as promoting 'traditional' i.e. cultural practices as 'true' or normative Islam⁵⁰⁷. This was illustrated for example by both A. and Z. who had been told by older women that shalwar kamiz was the only true Islamic dress code, A. recalling,

It's happened quite a few times, women, usually older ones in the mosque or at iftaris [the meal eaten to break a day's fasting] - religiousy gatherings - who start telling you that your hijab would be much better if it involved wearing shalwar kamiz. I mean I love wearing them but it's not the sole dress code for the entire Ummah.

Other participants had also heard similar ideas about modern Middle Eastern style jilbab. For example, R. mentioned,

One thing that can be frustrating's when you meet women who insist that there's only one way of doing things, like dressing in jilbab, or pinning your hijab in a certain way.

⁵⁰⁶ As discussed by other researchers such as Dwyer, C. 1999:17

⁵⁰⁷ Participants in Franks' study experienced similar problems. Franks 2001:137

Moving away from dress, S. laughed about the arguments with her husband who she felt had certain cultural notions of the relationship between husband and wife:

His mother may have run around after him all the time, but he's learning to pick up his own dirty clothes now... he's an aalim [someone learned], so he knows what Islam says, teaches it and he practices it too, but he's definitely influenced by the way he's brought up, and I tell him.

Similarly, Sh. mentioned the tension she somehow felt was generated between her sister-in-laws and herself when, in her view, she failed to live up to their cultural expectations of her and her relationship and role with others in the household.

They're never nasty, but I feel sometimes that they think, 'oh she's a gori ['white' woman], she doesn't know what she's meant to do or like they can't understand why I like to pray in the mosque instead of at home like they do'.

By using a static 'Muslim identity' in a socio-political manner in addition to engaging in the majority's tendency to otherise, these internal Muslim discourses present British minority Muslims and their differences in a way that regulating discourses claiming to represent the majority can use against them⁵⁰⁸. As Z. suggested,

Idiots like al-Muhajiroun or other weirdoes always seem to get on TV and in the papers... they just confirm what everyone thinks of us... that Muslims are stupid and aggressive, or just totally, irreconcilably different.

In contrast, many participants and other cradle Muslims separate culture from faith, viewing themselves as 'culturally British' but Muslim by faith. For example, M. in an interview alongside A. said,

⁵⁰⁸ See Hekman, S. 2000

Of course I'm still British, you don't lose your identity or the way you've been brought up, you become Muslim on top of that. Unless it contradicts the Din, there's no problem.

While A. agreed:

It's important to remember we're Muslim, but we can be British too, just like people born Muslim might have different cultures. You go to the mosque and people are comfortable with themselves and proud of their cultures but at the end of the day, we're all Muslim.

H. strengthens this argument, believing,

I'm as English as my dad, but I'm Muslim as well.

For converts to Islam the pressure to conform to insider ascriptions can be strong. While they may face prejudice as insiders 'leaving' the White / Anglo-Saxon / Christian discourses, as outsiders going in, religio-politically motivated groups often pay them particular attention. *Sd.* recounts how an overseas student had converted to Islam while studying at another British university, where the Islamic Society was dominated by 'Salafis'. This example involves a conversion in which the woman made rapid and major changes to her belief system, behaviour and dress:

...it was unbelievable - she'd only been a Muslim for about a month, yet when she met all the girls at Islamic Society she immediately expressed surprise and disapproval at the way we were dressed. Those of us wearing hijab were scorned for not being covered enough. She told us that she was intending to start wearing gloves and niqab along with her jilbab and khimar. You know, she thought this was the only way! And when she met a recent convert who wasn't in hijab, she went on about it ... but her zeal burnt out very quickly - she went from jilbab to cut-offs and a vest in a couple of months! The contrast was mad. The thing is she could never have kept it

up. Weirdly she was also an FN⁵⁰⁹ supporter - if she wasn't going on about wearing niqab she'd talk about how bad the Arab boys in France are...

This research suggested that most people take more time in their transition from non-Muslim to practising Muslim than the woman described above, but in the discussion of identity it is the process of transition itself, not how fast or slow it happened, that must be focused on.

A convert to Islam is subject to both her past and present: she negotiates her identity in different ways according to the point in her transition. For some, this may involve a sudden shift in appearance or behaviour as illustrated by *Sd.* above: a rapid generation of new facets of identity in addition to older ones may result in what may be viewed from the outside as a disparate or contradictory 'set' of identities. However, each facet should be viewed as an enmeshed layer corresponding to the fluidity of identities rather than a separate or distinct elements as regulatory discourses attempt to portray. The fluidity and lack of boundaries was illustrated further by *ZO.*, who had converted to Islam six months previous to participating in this study:

To be honest, I don't do much different than I was doing before. I'm dressing the same, I go out with the same mates... so apart from trying to add prayers and learn more, I don't feel any different. Just happy I'm a Muslim.

For *ZO.* the transition was explicitly fluid - an ongoing process in which Islamic practices and beliefs were 'added'.

Z. gave an overview of her transition and changes in identity:

I'd started learning about Islam for ages and even practicing on and off, about three or four years before I converted. A

⁵⁰⁹ 'Front Nationale', an ultra rightwing, racist political party in France

friend organised an Imam and loads of women from the community to witness my shahadatayn and at the same time I chose a Muslim name for myself. Over the next year or so I really struggled with my identity because I pressurised myself and felt I should really practice properly as I'd already learned a lot about Islam and how to practice... So I felt split, there was the old me, the one with the English name who went to pubs and clubs and didn't really practice and then there was the shiny new me with the Muslim name who I felt ought to be a really pious woman. It took a good while before I felt comfortable as me, as a Muslim.

Z. felt that her identity was at times confused because, perhaps due to the pervasive influence of regulatory discourses, she held fixed notions of identities before/after conversion to Islam. It was when she began to feel comfortable accepting and generating her own identity rather than trying to adhere to a theoretical notion of Muslim identity that she felt 'herself'.

These examples demonstrate the various processes of transition between conversion and identity. Fixed notions of the way someone should and should not be / look / behave, the regulating discourses of ascription, fail in lived reality. Sd. and Z.'s examples indicate that a person who attempts to adopt such singular identities may find it impossible to sustain. What is interesting about the regulatory discourses or 'two contradictory poles of desire / affirmation and aversion / disorientation'⁵¹⁰ is that through their aversion to agency and ignoring of lived experiences they act as two sides of the same coin. That is, elements of each discourse may either affirm a convert's own ideas or troublingly contradict them, but by their very nature as static discourses, fail to truly reflect real identities.

Lived experiences and the construction and generation of identities are far more complicated, and certainly more positive, as explained by the women who participated in this study. During interviews the

⁵¹⁰ Khan, S. 1998:469

complexity of the subject was highlighted when I asked participants how they would summarise their identity - none were comfortable or felt they really could. It was over the course of our conversations that identities were explained and discussed.

Currently, through the dominant and reactionary regulatory discourses and ascriptions, a 'clash of civilizations' is held up as the inevitable Muslim/non-Muslim interaction, generating and supporting the dichotomy Muslim vs. British. Both poles attempt to use otherisation as a vehicle of power: to differentiate, separate and then reduce an individual's lived reality into a category to be used against them. However, the lived reality of 'doing Muslim and British' resists these frameworks. These women do not conform to the ascriptions of others and in the case of some, like Z, the pressure of self-ascriptions. As M., who is thirty-one and converted after meeting her husband four years ago exclaimed:

I don't know what they're on about. What's the big deal? Here I am no more or less English than I was when I was born, being a Muslim. Where's the problem?

This indignation felt by participants was reflected by A:

There are plenty of people who think they can speak for us and about us, but they never bother to even ask us. I'm sick of hearing what some opinionated saddo thinks what a British Muslim can and cannot be. Because generally I don't recognise myself or any of my friends, and I'm talking about converts and born Muslims, in these so-called descriptions at all. Why is it [being Muslim and British] so difficult to accept for people?

While the women felt no contradiction in this Muslim/British aspect of their identity and enjoyed the diversity in their lives, they all felt that other people, both Muslims and non-Muslims had difficulty in comprehending this position. R.'s view reflects that of the other participants:

I've never thought of myself as particularly patriotic... I didn't really think about it I guess, but when people shout abuse like 'go home Paki', that sort of thing, I feel so indignant. I don't mean that it's OK if someone's from somewhere else, what I mean to say is when they say I'm foreign, it makes me feel more British.

K. analysed this phenomenon:

Basically, if some people see a woman in a scarf, they think, 'foreigner' and that means you can abuse that individual. Even when they're not being rude, you get people who can't get it round their heads that you could be English... Sometimes they can't understand what you're saying, as if you've developed another accent. It think to many people being Muslim is being foreign.

Participants all mentioned feeling at some time a degree of isolation, particularly when others were negative or attacked their way of living. A. gave a number of examples:

A couple of things were quite sad. When I stopped drinking quite a few of my friends took offence and said they felt I was judging them, even when I was still going with them to clubs and pubs but quietly having soft drinks. So after a while we drifted apart. The other thing which really sticks in my mind is when my mum, quite early on, so she hadn't adjusted to the idea of having a Muslim daughter, went on and on about how wearing a scarf wasn't 'English' and that I was rejecting the way I'd been brought up. That was sad because of course that isn't the case, anyway, the bloody Queen covers her head half the time, but how I saw it seemed irrelevant.

Here A. illustrates the powerful notion that Muslims and Islamic practices are somehow incompatible with being British, or 'normal'. A. uses the example of the Queen as a symbol of Britishness and

compares her hijab, as an item of clothing, to the Queen's attire. This demonstrates that the perceived meanings attached to her actions - not consuming alcohol for religious reasons rather than for example, driving a car, or wearing hijab rather than covering the head out of tradition or practical outdoor wear - are violating social norms⁵¹¹. The Islamic motivations are seen as threatening and alien.

Being a Muslim is felt by all the participants to be compatible with British identity, providing that 'British' cultural practices do not contradict Islamic Law. This is not an unusual process of identification: in Ethiopia where conversion to Islam started during the lifetime of the Prophet and Muslims make up 30% of the population, Muslims have retained their cultural, linguistic and ethnic identities⁵¹². For example, *R.* explained,

Obviously I'm British - this is where I was born, English is my language, I understand how to behave, interact - all the things that make somewhere your home. Obviously there are some aspects of British culture that I won't join in with anymore, like the whole drinking thing, but I'm happy out of that anyway...

Participants' primary definition of 'Britishness' was cultural: 'the lived experiences, material and emotional contexts that form the fabric of people's lives'⁵¹³. The women explained how they carried on post-conversion as normal, modifying their behaviour to fit into Islamic laws as much as they felt possible. For most, this meant altering their diets in some way, such as eating halal meat or vegetarian food; and /or cutting out alcohol and 'the drinking culture' some described as having previously been a part of; and modifying their dress in some way. *K.* for example wore a headscarf socially but not at work, *A.* wore hijab and loose Western clothing full time, *R.*, who was pregnant preferred the ease of jilbab - *its simplicity, hiding of body shape* and defiance of Western sexualised forms of fashion, while *ZO.* was *stopping wearing skimpy tops, tight jeans and that.*

⁵¹¹ Wohlrab-Sahr, M. 1999:355

⁵¹² Abbink, J. 1998:112

⁵¹³ Bhavnani, K. Foran, J. & Kurian, P. 2003:13

The 'Muslimness' and 'Britishness' of each woman's practices were therefore mixed and varied even over the course of one day, highlighting the fluidity of self-identification. *H.*, for example commented:

I always wear a scarf when I'm in religious mode, like going to the mosque or a lesson, or sometimes just when I'm feeling like it. The rest of the time, I just wear a nice modest top over my jeans ...

Participants were also comfortable in their interactions with other cultures. All had, to some degree, contact with a wider Muslim community which inevitably included people with a number of different cultures. *I.*, who regularly visited a culturally mixed mosque told me:

It's such a buzz in the mosque. There are people from all over the world, people with different cultural background...you get to sample all of this... different foods, ways to tie your scarf, ways of greeting each other... I love it.

Similarly, *K* enjoyed 'borrowing and altering all these different ways of doing things to suit myself'.

Where women had married into, or were deeply involved in a particular Muslim community, the incorporation of different cultural practices was more apparent. For example, *Rh.* whose husband is British-Pakistani lives with her in-laws. She defined her culture as British, wears shalwar kamiz on a daily basis, and is *totally easy with Pakistani ways*. A number of participants used to differing extents Arabic, Urdu and Punjabi words, particularly when talking about the religious aspects of their lives, such as the use of *insha'Allah* [Arabic: God Willing], *mashaAllah* [Arabic: whatever God wills to be will be] and *namaz* [Urdu, Farsi and Turkish: ritual prayer], but also in their general speech including *batameez* [Urdu: 'rude'] *Y^ani* [Arabic: 'that is...', 'meaning...'].

For example, *H.* explained,

Yeah, I'm more Pakistani than him [H.'s fiancé]. If we have little girls I'm putting them in shalwar kamiz, they look so cute, but he'd be just embarrassed. I think it's him with the identity crisis not me! And they should speak Punjabi too. I'm crap but his mum'll probably teach them anyway.

H. identifies herself as being English, including culturally. However, as this quote demonstrates, she sees no contradiction in identifying in various ways with Pakistani culture and languages.

Sz. a Pakistani born Muslim described this *métissage*:

I remember an English woman who married a Pakistani man. There weren't so many converts here in those days, and maybe she was isolated, but she completely embraced Pakistani ways, she learned Urdu, only wore shalwar kamiz...she even sent her children to a village and got them married off. The sad thing is we Asians thought it was a bit odd... she wasn't accepted as Pakistani. I think perhaps she just thought that she should be like the other Muslims in her community. But now I see these young British girls, not just converts, and they are picking and choosing what they like. All these young Muslims are mixing together, Arabs and Pakistanis and English. And they don't mix up culture and religion.

Sz. describes an identity phenomenon where individuals are identifying as Muslims and from that perspective, interacting with and choosing aspects of the different cultures found within their communities, thus generating new identities and ways of being.

As well as the different cultures used in the construction of their identities, participants spoke about the concept of Ummah - of

belonging to the global Muslim community. Zh. reflected the views of other participants when she said,

An amazing thing about being a Muslim is the attachment you have to other Muslims, wherever they are. The idea that we're all brothers and sisters is a powerful one; it's about shared humanity. Of course it isn't exactly like I imagined when I first converted. I used to think everyone would salaam each other in the street, which of course they don't, and when I went to Morocco on holiday and saw two women fighting in a market my dream that muhajibat were all wonderful pious women was a bit bruised! But although I had a reality check, it's amazing how many times people will call you sister, smile, that sort of thing. Especially when we're a minority, I think people stick together more.

Negative experiences do not stop women from living and enjoying diverse layers of affiliation and identification. One individual at any one time may draw on several cultural bases, feel attached to their family, their local diverse community and the Ummah, while experiencing continuity in this fluid identity. They do not choose between rigid frameworks of identity, or give up one for the other but each generates her identities through agency and choice.

Conversion is only a first step in the process of 'doing Muslim'. In the generating of their identities the women participating in this study demonstrate great diversity. Whether the transition is more rapid or slow, there are different attitudes as to how to self-identify. Some women choose to embrace the cultures of Muslims around them whole-heartedly, for example learning languages, modes of behaviour and ways of dressing. Others pick and choose aspects of different cultures, generating a very fluid cultural identity, emphasising the pan-Muslim aspect of different individual identities.

Both these approaches tend to belong to women who are personally involved with culturally different Muslims, for example through particular mosques or through marriage. Then there are women for

whom interacting with and within different socialities is of no interest - their concern is only in practicing Islam, and their cultural identities remain for the most part unchanged. All women, to differing extents, maintain / continue to generate facets of identity from before their conversions as well as generating new layers.

Conversion and self-identification are complex processes, intrinsically linked to one another. While fixed ascriptions may often be presented as the main standpoint of the groups they claim to speak for and about, they do not dictate social relations. Groups and individuals can and do resist and subvert myth making. In the very *doing* of their identities the women who participated in this study resist regulation and homogenisation. In addition, all also actively subverted the discourses through daily social interaction: in their places of study, at work and among friends and family.

Several women were involved in more overt activism, such as writing for both Muslim and non-Muslim publications or getting people involved with television programs. Others were involved in university Islamic Societies, university debates, giving talks in community centres and local schools and teaching in mosques. These women feel a need to engage with both the majority non-Muslim population and the minority Muslim population and carve a place for themselves and their identities. For example, A. felt that 'the more visible a diverse range of Muslims is, the more normalized Muslims will become to other members of British society'. Z. commented that her active engagement with people around her was important:

Even though sometimes I really can't be bothered, I feel it's somehow my duty to change people's minds.

The process of conversion and its effects on identities relate to the self-identification of individuals and the ascription through the various discourses of other people. For an individual, the transition starts from before conversion and involves changing, adding and/or parting from certain ways of being and identifying. In addition,

individuals are simultaneously subject to and involved in a wider set of discourses that ascribe identities to them.

However, otherisation, the 'clash of civilisations' and the reduction of identities, are not internalised. A convert is not by definition a reactive social misfit looking for Utopia in Islam and struggling to replace a failed 'British' identity with a 'Muslim' one. She is, like any other individual, a skilled social agent generating a fluid and unique identity in which there are many elements. This identity can include many facets, such as their Islamic faith, aspects of different cultures and ideas about nationality, so that it is impossible to generalise.

That difference exists and identity is relational in nature⁵¹⁴, does not have to lead to otherising⁵¹⁵. As the women here show, recognising the existence and power of regulatory discourses⁵¹⁶ does not confirm the ascriptions but provides a dramatic contrast to the actual experiences of individual and group identities. The process of self-identification includes choice and agency: each woman constantly generates her own. By refusing to conform to and choosing, as well as being by being by default outside the boundaries of identification set by regulatory discourses, the women can be understood as subverting or evading power. As A. reflected,

In a way I guess because I'm a convert I don't have to live up to expectations. I mean I'm not typically 'British' anymore, and I'm not seen like that... people look at me and assume I'm not English, so they don't expect me to be like them... but at the same time my culture's not got anything to do with Islam. In a way I can invent as I go along, I'm following Islam but I don't have the same cultural baggage like, say like female circumcision that some born Muslims have, OK that's an extreme example but you know what I mean, and I can leave out all the English things I don't like as well.

⁵¹⁴ Hekman, S. 2000:301

⁵¹⁵ Connolly, W.E. 1991

⁵¹⁶ Hekman, S. 2000:296 argues that difference becomes a source of power to be used by the dominant

Chapter 6: Hijab

A subject that each woman participating in this study discussed, and which is directly related to their themes of feminism, conversion and identity, was hijab - the various female dress codes associated with Islam. This chapter will explore the meanings of hijab from the highly varied perspectives of the regulating discourses portrayed as 'Western' or British and those found specifically within the Muslim community; the diverse views of feminisms; theories within Islam; and the ideas and experiences of the women participating in this study. As a theme, hijab occupies a useful position at the intersections of interaction between the narratives, ideas and processes investigated in this thesis.

While the matter of dress is generally ignored or trivialised in popular culture and academia⁵¹⁷, the subject of Muslim women's dress, for the abundant reasons that will be explored, generates a huge level of impassioned interest. More specifically, the attention is focussed on the wearing or non-wearing of *hijab*. Hijab, defined in this context and in modern usage as the many forms of female dress relating to Islamic concepts of modesty, has become a focal point in two discourses. These can be defined broadly as an internal Muslim debate on the nature of modesty, both behavioural and physical, and a wider discussion involving a specifically Western, non-Muslim discourse on Islam in general and Muslim women in particular. Within these discourses the headscarf has become a metonym for both the concept of hijab and other notions about women and Islam that go far beyond what a piece of fabric can ever be⁵¹⁸. These layers of meaning have been, over time and space, discussed and reformulated within the spheres of Muslim and non-Muslim popular media, the secular Western academy and in Muslim scholarship thus resulting in hijab's status as an exaggerated signifier within these

⁵¹⁷ Brydon, A. & Niessen, S. 1998:ix-x

⁵¹⁸ Ghazal Read, J. & Bartkowski, J.P. 2000: 397

discourses⁵¹⁹. This intense focus has become, in Ahmed's words 'ludicrous'⁵²⁰.

Although this intense focus on hijab misleadingly magnifies its importance in Islam compared with, for example, belief and the foundational practices and participant's own views, the great interest generated by the subject calls for its discussion. Hijab is a far more complex concept than the debates it tends to engender within the regulatory discourses: it is not just the numerous types of dress for head and body, but also relates to the modest behaviour of men as well as women. It has different and varying meanings for those, and I echo El Guindi⁵²¹, who do / do not/ intend to/ refuse to/ insist on wearing it, and for anyone else who may have an opinion.

The Arabic word *hijab* carries multiple meanings. The verb *hajaba* means, in general, 'to cover' and its noun, *hijab*, means amongst other things a 'cover', 'curtain' or 'woman's veil'⁵²². In the context of women's dress and this study, it is used to denote the varying forms and acts of bodily covering worn by Muslim women, and particularly in modern usage, the headscarf.

However, the specific term for a head covering used by classical Muslim scholars and derived from the Quran is *khimar*. The *khimar* is one term of many in the Muslim world for a garment that can be used to cover the hair and face to varying degrees⁵²³. Like Bullock⁵²⁴ and El Guindi⁵²⁵, I wish to use the term *hijab* instead of *veil* when discussing Muslim practices, as *veil* is confusing in its association with face covering which also has many names, such as *niqab* and *burqa*. 'Veil' is also problematic for its association with Christian nuns and embeddedness in the essentialised and fetishised exoticism of Orientalist discourse⁵²⁶.

⁵¹⁹ Dwyer, C. 1999:5-6; Franks, M. 2000:918

⁵²⁰ Ahmed, L. 1992:167

⁵²¹ El Guindi, F. 1999: see dedication

⁵²² Cowen, J.M. 1979:184

⁵²³ El Guindi, F. 1999:97

⁵²⁴ Bullock, K. 2002:xl-xli

⁵²⁵ El Guindi, F. 1999:xi

⁵²⁶ Allolua, M. 1986; El Guindi, F. 1999; Kabbani, R. 1986; Said, E. 1979

To understand hijab and the current climate that surrounds the subject, it is important to look at its place in Islam through three major reference points: the Quran, Sunnah and history. The verses of the Quran are contextualised by other verses in the Quran, and are further contextualised by the Sunnah, that is, how the commands were lived by the Prophet Muhammad which is recorded through the ahadith: his sayings and actions.

The mujtahid Muslim scholars have given judgments which specify more explicitly the ways in which Muslim men and women should behave and dress in terms of modesty. These have been in turn contextualised at different times and places in the cultures and classes of Muslim people. It is these sources that are foundational to the internal Muslim debate on hijab.

The first source, the Quran, is indisputable for all Muslims, although the interpretations of the verses do differ. The verses which are particularly relevant to the discussion of hijab that refer to a general code of modesty for both men and women and also specifically to women's dress and headscarves are Surah an-Nur, verses 30 and 31 which can be interpreted / translated as meaning:

30. *Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty [guard their private parts]. That is purer for them. And Allah knows all that they do.*
31. *And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty [guard their private parts]; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their head cloths [khumurihinna] over their bosoms [juyubihinna] and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husband's fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women, or the slaves whom their right hands possess, or male servants free of physical needs, or small children who have no sense of feminine sex; and*

that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments. Turn to Allah all of you, O believers so that you may be successful.

The beginnings of both verses, in the same way, enjoin Muslim men and women respectively to behave modestly in behaviour and dress. Examples of modest behaviour are mentioned: lowering the gaze⁵²⁷, guarding the 'private parts'⁵²⁸ and not acting in a sexually provocative manner. For women, the penultimate line of verse 31 specifically mentions not to continue the jahiliya practice of 'striking the feet', which involved the wearing and jangling of metal anklets in order to flirt and sexually attract⁵²⁹.

These lines are part of a general, uncontested and nuanced concept of modest behaviour for all Muslims: while being a believer in Islam rests entirely on belief, followed by an obligation to perform certain actions such as prayer and alms giving, the Quran and Sunnah set out codes of behaviour that Muslims should follow. Like verses 30 and 31 of Surah an-Nur, other verses highlight the importance of modesty in behaviour and social relations, such as Surah Al-Furqan, verse 63, which can be understood to mean,

And the virtuous slaves of Ar-Rahman are those who walk the earth in modesty and when addressed by the ignorant reply with 'peace'.

This 'modesty' includes a sense of humility in social relations, extended to the way people talk about themselves, their attitude towards others, and in material gain. Importance is also placed on sexual reserve in public, where the relations between people other than spouses are regulated. Modest practices thus include lowering

⁵²⁷ 'Lowering the gaze' is understood by orthodox Muslims not literally without exception, but as avoiding giving and receiving sexual gaze from other than spouses or looking at the 'private parts' of others (defined variously).

⁵²⁸ The Islamic definition of 'private parts' is variable according to whose body is being looked at, and by whom, scholars giving differing opinions.

⁵²⁹ El Guindi, F. 1999:137

the gaze, dressing in a modest manner and avoiding being alone with a marriageable person of the opposite sex.

In contrast to modest behaviour, the meanings of Quranic lines that refer to modest dress codes have become more contested⁵³⁰: whether there are dress codes at all, and if so what they constitute. Surah an-Nur verse 31 contains two important references to dress. The first is that Muslim women should not display/reveal their *zeenatahunna illa ma zahara minhā*, which is literally translated as *they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof*. This line is a point of contestation as it is interpreted in extremely different ways. Some understand that it means Muslim women should not show off with their ornaments, for example jewellery and make-up⁵³¹, while in contrast others believe it is a command for women to cover everything but one or two eyes 'for necessity to see the way'⁵³².

However, like all verses, it must be contextualised and specified by other verses and the Sunnah. Sunni scholars such as Qurtabi and ar-Razi, taking their stance from the companions of the Prophet such as ^Aisha and ^Abdullah Ibn ^Abbas, have explained in their commentaries that this line refers to covering the body except for the face and hands⁵³³. What unites these interpretations is the idea of concealing physical beauty through dress.

The next line provides a more explicit specification:

they should draw their khumurihinna over their juyubihinna and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husband's fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women, or the slaves whom their right hands

⁵³⁰ Afshar, H. 1998:13

⁵³¹ Mernissi, F. 1975:87-140

⁵³² See the Saudi translation by Dr Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din al-Hilalo and Dr. Muhammad Muhsin Khan for the King Fahd Complex

⁵³³ Tafseer of At-Tabariyy. There are differences of opinion as to covering the feet (ref. taken orally)

possess, or male servants free of physical needs, or small children who have no sense of female sex

That is, in front of non-Mahram, sexual men, women should *draw their khumurihinna over their bosoms [juyubihinna]*. The differences in opinion relating to this line lie in the understanding of *khumurihinna*: the only differences over *juyubihinna* appear to be over the words 'bosom' or 'chest', which in this context has little impact on understanding.

Khumurihinna, is a plural of *khimar* and has been translated as by some authors as being a woman's shawl⁵³⁴ or scarf⁵³⁵. In English, both 'shawl' and 'scarf' are fairly general terms and are therefore used as a way of interpreting this verse as a command for Muslim women to cover their bosoms or refrain from displaying cleavage⁵³⁶. By using 'shawl' or 'scarf' this view supports the covering of the chest area, for example by draping a shawl over the chest from the shoulders, but does not support the covering of a woman's head. Others define the word *khimar* with its modern, spoken Arabic meaning: that of a headscarf that covers the face⁵³⁷ and, ignoring other textual evidence, make the interpretation that it is obligatory for women to cover the entire body and face.

However, the meaning understood by Arabic speakers at the time of revelation and both classical Muslim and non-Muslim scholars is different again. A typical example of Western academic understanding is Lane's classic Arabic-English Lexicon which provides a the general definition of *khimar*:

*A woman's head-covering; (Mgh, TA) a piece of cloth with which a woman covers her head*⁵³⁸

⁵³⁴ See Barlas, A. 2002:55

⁵³⁵ Ahmed, L. 1992:55

⁵³⁶ Afshar, H. 1998:14; Ahmed, L. 1992:55

⁵³⁷ Wehr, H. 1994:302

⁵³⁸ Lane, Edward William, 1865. 1984 edition:809

This specification of khimar being an item of clothing for the head is further highlighted by the definition of *khumur*:

*A man's turban e.g. because a man covers his head with it in like manner to a woman covers her head with her khimar*⁵³⁹

Lane clearly specifies the khimar to be a garment for the head, and not a general shawl. The khimar is therefore understood to be a garment used specifically to cover the head. However, it is the opinion of the *mujtahid* scholars that carries weight for the Muslim participants: their rulings differentiate between covering the hair, neck and cleavage, and covering the face.

Although the khimar can also be used as a face covering, in context with the literal and orthodox understandings of the previous line in verse 31 of Surat an-Nur referring to 'that which is apparent' i.e. the hands and face, the command is to draw the khimar over the bosom and excludes the covering of the face⁵⁴⁰. This is further supported in the ahadith and also by the ruling that women should not cover their faces when praying or during the Hajj rituals: covering the face in other circumstances is therefore viewed as an *option*.

Classical Muslim scholars gave more detailed explanations of the khimar, Qurtabi for example explaining that at the time of revelation (and still seen today), women would cover their heads with a khimar, the ends of which hung down so that some hair, the ears, neck and the part of the chest not covered by other items of clothing were left exposed⁵⁴¹. El Guindi also appears to have reached this conclusion independently, through the analysis of present day ethnography in the Arab world such as servant dress in Yemen⁵⁴².

Verse 31 of Surah an-Nur highlights the foundational concept of hijab including some sort of headscarf: the khimar is first and foremost on the head in order to be modified to cover the chest. The

⁵³⁹ Lane, E. W. (1865) 1984 edition:809

⁵⁴⁰ See Tafisr at-Tabariyy Volume 9:54 (ref. taken orally)

⁵⁴¹ See Tafisr of Qurtabi (ref. taken orally)

⁵⁴² El Guindi, F. 1999:137

verse can therefore be interpreted in terms of dress codes as an instruction for Muslim women to cover their bodies and hair with clothing: hijab.

Another Quranic verse involving women's dress is Surah Al-Ahzab verse 59, which refers to the outer clothes of women, *jalabiynihinna* a plural of *jilbab*, and expresses that this dress, like head coverings, and in addition to notions of modesty, is to distinguish and identify Muslim women in a positive way. The relevant lines can be understood as meaning:

O Prophet! Tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to draw their jalabiynihinna over their bodies. That will be better, that they should be known so as not to be annoyed.

Different forms of this garment, an outer gown, can be seen on men and women throughout the Middle East, for example men's *gallabiya* in Egypt, and women's *abayah* in the Gulf. Orthodox scholars have explained that the verse is not a command of obligation to all Muslim women, but a recommendation. In their interpretation the wearing of *jilbab* is a *sunnah*⁵⁴³.

The ways of dressing which conform to the *fiqh* are far broader, reflected in the diversity of dress amongst Muslims world wide. In contrast with orthodoxy, an opinion has surfaced in recent years that uses this verse alone as evidence that it is obligatory for all Muslim women to wear *jilbab*. The form of *jilbab* favoured by people of this persuasion is a modern, very loose fitting one-piece gown in dark/black opaque material. Yet, despite the disparities in opinions on *jilbab*, there is a unifying theme: a concept of loose, covering clothing that may be understood as part of a modest dress code and a distinguishing, positive mark of being Muslim.

⁵⁴³ A *Sunnah*, tradition of the Prophet, is rewardable not obligatory.

Along with many contested practices, such differences arise over whether various commands in the Quran are obligations or recommendations, particularly when verses are used out of context, without other verses or the Sunnah. For example, verse 282 of Surat Al-Baqarah instructs people to 'take witnesses whenever you make a commercial contract', a line that taken on its own, could be understood to mean that witnesses are needed every time for every sale.

In relation to dress codes, similar differences thus occur - taken on their own, covering the hair and neck with the khimar can be viewed as a recommendation and not an obligation while wearing the jilbab may be understood as an obligation and not just a recommendation. It is therefore necessary that interpretations are deduced in context with all the evidence, in accordance to the traditional methodology.

The above verses are interpreted by the Muslim majority as proof that some sort of bodily and head covering through dress is an obligation. That is, Verse 59 of Surah Al-Ahzab and Verse 31 of Surah an-Nur describe the covering of the body with Verse 31 of Surah An-Nur specifically mentioning a head covering. However, as has been shown, it is these same verses that are also used to contest the notion of hijab as a dress code. The root causes of these differences are the definitions given to particular terms in the Quran such as *khimar*, the question of whether a command is a recommendation or obligation and also in the different vocabulary of other languages used by people in their discussions of hijab.

The arguments contesting hijab as a modest dress code for the body and hair used within the Muslim debate are based only on the Quran and ignore the hadith. They are consequently hinged on the definitions of Quranic terms, namely *khimar* and *hijab*. Throughout writings that argue along this line, covering dress is referred to as 'the veil' and the action of covering referred to as 'veiling'. However, when referring to the verse mentioning *khimar*, authors usually use,

as shown above, general terms such as 'scarf'⁵⁴⁴. The use of 'veil', a word that carries many meanings, in conjunction with generalised definitions of *khimar*, allows for haziness in many of these arguments.

For example, in *Beyond the Veil* Mernissi discusses 'veiling', a term which she seems to use to include physical seclusion⁵⁴⁵, face covering and bodily covering in general. In her argument she does not refer explicitly to Verse 31 of Surah an-Nur, instead referring to Verse 60 of the same chapter which means, in her interpretation, that 'elderly women' are excused for 'non-veiling' due to their 'unattractive' appearance⁵⁴⁶. Mernissi's understanding of 'non-veiling' in the verse refers to the discarding of the *thawb*, a term for 'cloth' or general outer garments. Mernissi believes that Islam has become corrupted by misogyny and as such a monolithic anti-woman culture has arisen in which 'men and women are foe'⁵⁴⁷. She therefore asserts that Islam 'required pious women to be modest in their appearance and hide all ornamentation and eye catching beauty behind veils'⁵⁴⁸ in the context of this misogyny - for Mernissi, hijab is a part of the patriarchal machine. Her argument, simplified, is that Islam is oppressive and anti-woman and that 'veiling' is part of this oppression that exists as a method of 'protecting a passive male who cannot control himself sexually in the presence of lust-inducing females'⁵⁴⁹.

While this line of argument rails against the concept and practice of covering, it does not contest the notion of bodily covering through dress within Islam. In her later work, *Women and Islam*⁵⁵⁰, Mernissi explores 'the institution of hijab'⁵⁵¹ which again seems to include the

⁵⁴⁴ Ahmed, L. 1992:55

⁵⁴⁵ I have not discussed cultural monosociality and its affiliated institutions such as purdah, as the women in this study did not practice it in terms of seclusion: S. referred to her purdah meaning her niqabi dress code. For a cultural comparison see for example Papanek, H. 1973

⁵⁴⁶ Mernissi, F. 1975:138-140

⁵⁴⁷ Mernissi, F. 1975:144

⁵⁴⁸ Mernissi, F. 1975:138-140

⁵⁴⁹ Mernissi, F. 1975:138-140

⁵⁵⁰ Mernissi, F. 1987

⁵⁵¹ Mernissi, F. 1987:87-88

very different practices of seclusion, face covering and bodily covering. This argument involves understanding the Muslim concept of hijab by focusing solely on the actual term *hijab* and forms of its root *h-j-b* within the Quran which can mean in different contexts of these verses, a screen or metaphorical veil, but not dress. In this discussion, Mernissi does not refer to the verses in which actual dress is mentioned, such as khimar in Surah an-Nur verse 31 and jilbab in Surah al-Ahzab verse 59. Instead she refers to verse 53 of Surah al-Ahzab, a verse that describes addressing the wives of the Prophet from behind a curtain, i.e. hijab, which she claims 'is regarded by the founders of religious knowledge as the basis of the institution of the hijab'⁵⁵². Pointing out that this verse refers to a curtain in the context of the wives of the Prophet and that the scholars are therefore wrong, Mernissi then rejects hijab entirely, including dress, as a concept and physical form. These two writings lead to a general confusion about Mernissi's writings: is she rejecting, and to what extent, the concept and practices of seclusion or face veiling or general bodily covering?

Although a critique of Mernissi's writing is needed in the context of hijab, it is important not to overlook her underlying message that misogynist cultures are in existence and must be confronted. While there is no homogenous woman-hating Islamic culture, there are men in the Muslim world, as there are everywhere else, who wish to subdue and oppress the women in their midst. Mernissi herself argues in her more recent work that the problem of women's rights is with the male elite rather than Islam⁵⁵³. For example, there are women who are kept prisoner in their homes in the name of 'modesty', a practice justified by the perpetrators as 'Islamic'. This is why an Islamic feminism rather than the alienating feminism of Mernissi is needed, to address problems within communities through feminisms legitimatised as not only compatible, but derived directly from Islamic teachings. Attacking the concept and practice of hijab does not help women, even those who are forced to wear it in various forms.

⁵⁵² Mernissi, F. 1987:85-88

⁵⁵³ Mernissi, F. 1991:ix

Confusion over the use of the term 'veil' can also be seen in the works of other authors. For example, El Saadawi can be quoted as saying that there is no place in the Quran in which the 'veil' is imposed, yet in the same essay she gives the interpretation that Surah an-Nur verse 31 'requires that [Muslim women] cover all parts of the body except the face and the palms of the hand', specifying her use of the term 'veil' to mean face covering⁵⁵⁴. Such cases show how discussions surrounding the dress codes of Muslim women are often amalgamated into discussions about spatial segregation and the status of women in Islam and Muslim communities. The varied and often generalised terminology, particularly *veiling* but also *hijab*, serve to complicate the issues⁵⁵⁵.

The second source for understanding the place of hijab in Islam is the Sunnah, the sayings and actions of the Prophet recorded in the hadith literature. The ahadith pertaining to modesty in general and hijab in particular are very explicit in their meaning, and have been used by scholars, in conjunction with the Quranic verses, to specify the ways in which Muslims should ideally behave and dress. Ahadith pertaining to modest behaviour include the following, which demonstrates the high status of modesty:

It is narrated on the authority of Abu Huraira that the Prophet said: Iman⁵⁵⁶ has over seventy branches, and modesty is a branch of Iman.⁵⁵⁷

A number of hadith are used to specify the dress codes of men and women. Concerning women for example, Abu Dawud⁵⁵⁸ (32:4092) transmitted a hadith from ^Aisha which means:

Asma⁵⁵⁹ once met the Prophet wearing thin, translucent clothes. The Prophet turned his face away from her and told

⁵⁵⁴ El Saadawi, N. 1997:85

⁵⁵⁵ See Karam, A. 1998:134; Wadud-Muhsin, A. 1993:10

⁵⁵⁶ Broadly translated as 'faith'

⁵⁵⁷ From Sahih Muslim, Book 1, Number 55, Chapter 13: Concerning the Branches of Iman

(ref. taken orally)

⁵⁵⁸ Abu Dawud. 32:4092 (ref. taken orally)

her, 'Asma, when a woman begins to menstruate, nothing should be seen of her except this and this' and he pointed to his face and hands.

This hadith is particularly specific in the understanding of women's dress codes and along with other ahadith and verses from the Quran contributes to the orthodox rulings on dress: that theoretically a woman, depending on her age, status and who she is with, covers her body other than the face, hands and according to some, feet. How and if this is done varies dramatically: religious norms have not lead to static ways of dressing or a monolithic Hijab. The way in which Muslim women dress has differed over a time period of more than one thousand years and a geographical area stretching continents, with differences in style based on fashions, class and cultural norms. This is, as Dwyer notes, the 'historical dynamism'⁵⁶⁰ of hijab. Muslim women such as the participants in this study, in a free environment, exercise agency and informed choice. They may decide to wear or not wear hijab to varying levels and for differing reasons: in reality the theoretical perspectives are possibilities, not actualities.

From the analysis of the Quran, Sunnah and understandings of dress codes within fiqh, Muslim hijab as a broader concept and as clothing is rooted in Islam. However, covering dress codes have existed throughout recorded history, practices contextualised by time, place, religion, class and culture. To understand the diversity of 'covering' different histories must be mentioned.

Much of the literature on hijab and its history, including feminist studies, has paid particular attention to face covering, perhaps due to its perceived exoticism and certainly for feminists, because of its perceived oppressiveness⁵⁶¹. Although only one participant in this study wore it as a matter of course, the history of face covering is

⁵⁵⁹ ^Aisha's sister and daughter of Abu Bakr, the first Caliph.

⁵⁶⁰ Zayzafoon, L.B. Y. 2005:67 quoting Fanon, F. 1965:63; Dwyer, C. 1999:7

⁵⁶¹ Ahmed, L.1992; Bonvillian, N. 1995; Donnell, A.1999; Mernissi, F. 1985 & 1991

nevertheless significant as it highlights the diverse meanings behind similar dress codes and subverts prevailing stereotypes.

Assyrian law⁵⁶² for example, enforced total covering for noble women and 'non-veiling' for lone, unmarried slave girls. Flouting this law was a severely punishable offence. The Assyrian meanings given to facial covering reflected a 'highly stratified social system based on class, moral and marital status'⁵⁶³, where the covered noble woman enjoyed power and rank⁵⁶⁴. In contrast, classical Greek society⁵⁶⁵ viewed women as innately inferior to men and promoted a code of female seclusion within the house and total covering through dress⁵⁶⁶. These contrasting examples demonstrate the importance of the contexts in which dress is situated.

In the case of Muslims, the wearing / not wearing, styles and meanings of face covering by men⁵⁶⁷ and women has varied massively even within the same time and place. One source of influence in the wearing of niqab in the Middle East and Subcontinent is the historic expansion of Persian, Mesopotamian, and Mediterranean cultures in the region, in which high status women covered their faces long before the advent of Islam⁵⁶⁸. The high level of cultural mixing in the Islamic empire seems to have created both widespread similarity and diversity. Similarly the meanings behind covering have extended beyond the religious. Some Bedouin women have reported wearing black coverings as a sign of womanhood and 'shame'⁵⁶⁹ while some Omani women have reported their burqa as carrying the simultaneous meanings of status, local identity and beauty⁵⁷⁰.

⁵⁶² Estimated to have been written around 1450-1250 BCE

⁵⁶³ El Guindi, F. 1999:15

⁵⁶⁴ Ahmed, L. 1992:15; El Guindi, F. 1999:16

⁵⁶⁵ 550-323 BCE

⁵⁶⁶ Ahmed, L. 1992:28,29; El Guindi, F. 1999:17,18

⁵⁶⁷ Men have also, in different areas and times, covered their faces culturally, as opposed to environmental necessity, often when the women of that area do not. El Guindi reports many examples of Arab men pre and post-Islam using face covers, as do Tuareg men of high status. El Guindi, F. 1999:129-130

⁵⁶⁸ Ahmed, L. 1992:11-30; El Guindi, F. 1999:11-22 including quote from Stern, G. 1939a

⁵⁶⁹ Abu Lughod, L. 1986

⁵⁷⁰ Wikan, U. 1982

In the late twentieth century, new forms of female face covering have appeared amongst communities such as the niqab and jilbab of urban activist women in Egypt whose dress is viewed as anti-government protest⁵⁷¹. In cities across Pakistan, casual observers report women of different classes donning black niqab and abayah over their shalwar kamiz, interpreted variously as the spread of Saudi influence in mosques, a way of accessing power through modernity, current fashions, or disguising poverty. Different again are reports of the urban poor in Bangladesh dressing in such a combination as a result of free distribution of Saudi style abayahs from some mosques⁵⁷².

Moving away from face covering, historical examples for head and body covering in different cultures are also huge in number and equally diverse. In the Arab world there is differing evidence as to the wearing of head coverings. Pre-Islamic Arab poetry mentions women wearing *khimar*⁵⁷³, yet a saying of the Prophet's wife ^Aisha narrated by the female companion Safiyya bint Shaibah tells how a group of early Muslim women, on hearing the aforementioned verse 31 of Surat An-Nur cut their waist cloths and used them as head coverings⁵⁷⁴. This contrasting evidence suggests that individuals and groups even within the same area wore different forms of dress, as is so in the present day.

The diversity in covering is linked to class and locality as well as culture: while ornate and full covering through dress has been practiced by urbanites, such styles are not practical for women who work on the land. Similarly, slaves and low status women have traditionally worn far less clothing than their higher status, richer sisters⁵⁷⁵. In terms of styles outside the Middle East, Muslim dress is even more variable, from the trousers and bonnets of Hui Muslim women in China to the sarongs of Malaysia.

⁵⁷¹ Dwyer, C. 1999:7; El Guindi, F. 1999: 129-146

⁵⁷² Franks, M. 2005.

⁵⁷³ El Guindi 1999:120 referring to Jubori's discussion of dress in Arab poetry (1989)

⁵⁷⁴ Sahih Al-Bukhari, Vol. 6, Hadith 282 (ref. taken orally)

⁵⁷⁵ Ahmed, L. 1992; El Guindi, F. 1999:103, 137; Memissi, F.

What does unify Muslim dress is a general conformity to classical fiqh with women (and men) covering, to a lesser or greater extent, their bodies and hair. The flexibility within Islam has enabled an Islamification of local styles of clothing rather than a general Arabisation, maintaining distinct cultural and social identities through dress while underlining 'Muslimness'.

Clearly the concept of hijab, its various forms, their manifestations and sources of legitimacy have been debated between Muslims throughout history⁵⁷⁶. For example, similar campaigns against face-covering and their cultural links to female subordination⁵⁷⁷ have been instigated by Muslim feminists over time and place, such as Zain al-Din in Lebanon (1928)⁵⁷⁸ and al Badiya in Egypt (1909)⁵⁷⁹ and their later sisters Said in Egypt (1973)⁵⁸⁰ and al-Sharki in Yemen (1988)⁵⁸¹ who were also either pro or without opposition to scarves and often obtained the backing of the ulema⁵⁸². Such anti-niqab campaigns are very different to the pro-niqab, political protests of modern Egypt and Turkey, where recent debates hold new meanings⁵⁸³.

Debates have also raged within single nation-states such as Algeria, which has seen both pro and anti 'veiling' positions over the years, from the French imperialists and the radical religio-political groups⁵⁸⁴. Similar contestations have occurred and are still occurring in Turkey, between secularists and their critics⁵⁸⁵.

Non-Muslims have also debated the concept of hijab throughout history, both within the Muslim world, including the Christian

⁵⁷⁶ Ahmed, L. 1992:66-67, 144-168; Göle, N. 1996:3-6

⁵⁷⁷ Badran, M. 1995:4-8

⁵⁷⁸ Zain al Din, N. 1928. in Badran, M & Cooke, M. 1990:270-276

⁵⁷⁹ al Badiya, B. 1909. in Badran, M & Cooke, M. 1990:232-234

⁵⁸⁰ Said, A. 1973. in Badran, M & Cooke, M. 1990:357-362

⁵⁸¹ al-Sharki, A. 1988. in Badran, M & Cooke, M. 1990:375-385

⁵⁸² Badran, M. 1995:91-93

⁵⁸³ See Badran, M. 1995:22-23; Duval, S. 1998 in Ask, K. & Tjomsland, M. 1998:45-72; Göle, N. 1996:5

⁵⁸⁴ Helie, M-A. 1987. in Badran, M & Cooke, M. 1990:108-109

⁵⁸⁵ Ahmed, L. 1992:164; Özdalga, E. 1998:5-33; Shankland, D. 1999:8-9

Palestinian 'anti-veiling' movements of the early 20th century⁵⁸⁶, Westernist critiques⁵⁸⁷ and the Western discussions instigated by Victorians such as Cromer⁵⁸⁸. The far more recent discussions of hijab in the West are explored in further depth later in this chapter.

This importance of dress in the social sphere through its major role in the generation and ascription of identities must also be analysed: the religious, historical and cultural can explain *why* dress codes such as hijab exist, but they do not explain the impact this concept and way of dressing has had and continues to have on social relations within Muslim communities and between Muslims and non-Muslims.

Although social science in the twentieth century often ignored dress as a banal aspect of human sociality, throughout history⁵⁸⁹ and in the present day, its importance as a visible sign, an 'articulation of identity'⁵⁹⁰, has been highlighted by many scholars. While ornamentation and the practical uses of clothing should not be denied, it is the social meaning of dress that is of interest here.

Braudel described dress as a language, connecting and differentiating people⁵⁹¹ and used by individuals and groups to self-identify and ascribe meanings to others⁵⁹². Haute couture, military uniforms, *traje* revivalism in Guatemala⁵⁹³ and the enforced addition of the Star of David to Jewish clothes by Nazis illustrate the ways in which dress can be manipulated to signify wealth, status, belonging, obedience, political rebellion, and even coercive ascription and rejection. Gender⁵⁹⁴, class⁵⁹⁵, ethnic, cultural and national identities

⁵⁸⁶ Badran, M. 1995:237-231

⁵⁸⁷ Göle, N. 1996:37-38

⁵⁸⁸ Ahmed, L. 1992:152-153, 230; MacLeod, A.E. 1995:190

⁵⁸⁹ For example in the 18C CE, Muhammad Murtada bin Muhammad al-Zabidi mentioned the importance of clothing 'for self-beautification and adornment and for protection against heat and cold' in his book *Taj al-^Arus: Encyclopaedia of Islam* (new edition) vol.V 732-747

⁵⁹⁰ Brydon, A. 1998. in Brydon, A. & Niessen, S. 1998:1

⁵⁹¹ Braudel, F. 1973:235-236

⁵⁹² Dwyer, C. 1999:5-6

⁵⁹³ Indigenous dress used as a tool of political dissent: see Hendrickson, C.E. 1995

⁵⁹⁴ Dwyer, C. 1999:20

⁵⁹⁵ Brydon, A. & Niessen, S. 1998:ix

are all expressed, played out and assumed daily in this form of powerful, instant, visual statement. This is not to essentialise the meanings of different forms of dress, even within a specific 'type', as each individual carries an interpretation of her own and that of others: meanings are multiple and often contradictory⁵⁹⁶.

It is useful to define two general layers of meaning that can be read into dress: an individual's expression of self, individuality and also group memberships, which may display at any one time dominant and sub-cultural, national, religious, aesthetic, class and familial identities. Dress also communicates the meanings ascribed by others to the dress and subsequently the individual and group to which it is perceived as belonging. These meanings are themselves contextualised in the social, historical, political and economic situation of the time. In this framework dress is no longer banal, but a highly complicated and complicating daily act⁵⁹⁷.

An individual may dress for herself, but as a social actor she is both communicating to others and receiving the social impact of the dress in a dialogue that is difficult to manipulate. Thus, the importance and power of dress does not reside in the items of clothing or the fabric, but is in the meanings with which it is imbued⁵⁹⁸. In this light, a Muslim headscarf is not, as is often ascribed to them, intrinsically 'good' or 'bad'. Such judgments of the headscarf itself and the ideas associated with it reside in the actual reasons a woman wears one as well as in the perception of others⁵⁹⁹. Against this background, a woman wearing hijab, despite her own reasons, is also subject to the meanings given by others.

Within the Ummah there is an internal debate concerning female dress codes, as has been illustrated by the differing interpretations of Quran and Sunnah and practices over time and space. Present in these debates are the binary discourses that attempt to force women to adopt certain forms of dress, in particular to cover or un-cover

⁵⁹⁶ Brydon, A. & Niessen, S. 1998: ix, x, xi

⁵⁹⁷ Dwyer, C. 1999:19

⁵⁹⁸ Brydon, A. & Niessen, S. 1998:xii, xiii

⁵⁹⁹ Franks, M. 2000:917, 918

parts of the head. In contrast to these discourses, the lived realities of women are far more complex - even in states where dress codes are enforced, women resist. In relation to these internal regulatory discourses the participants held mixed views and experienced these discourses differently with regards to whether or not they wore hijab. ZO. , at the time of research was wearing hijab for prayer only:

I haven't thought about when or if I will... Well, I haven't been Muslim for very long and it's just not a priority [wearing hijab]. Obviously I wear a scarf and cover properly when I'm praying but it's the praying and stopping drinking that I need to concentrate on, so there's no way I'm ready for hijab!

For ZO. hijab was a minor part in her practicing of Islam, something to which she had given little consideration. Her position was that hijab, while part of Islamic practice was something far less foundational than praying that she envisaged could be part of her life in the future but would not be at present. She did not appear to feel any pressure from internal discourses, commenting,

It's not as if anyone minds, I go to classes, you know to help me learn salat [daily ritual prayer] and no one stands around tutting. Even when you go to the mosque there's plenty of women who pull one on as they go in... I just don't see it as an issue.

As quoted in Chapter 4, ZO. had made modifications to her general dress code,

I have made an effort to tone down my wardrobe... since I've become Muslim I've thought more about it and it's quite embarrassing what I used to wear, not so much recently, but when I was younger oh my God my skirts were short, really ugly... not at all dignified! So I have changed a bit, stopping wearing skimpy tops, tight jeans and that.

However, this increased modesty, which she explained as covering her legs and arms, for example in jeans and a shirt, was framed not only by religious obligations but a sense of 'dignity' and aesthetics.

H., like *ZO.*, put on a scarf for praying and religious based activities but did not cover her hair in general. She saw hijab as incorporating different stages that started with general modest dress:

I'm English. You don't have to start looking Pakistani or Arab to dress modestly, look at what I'm wearing, jeans and a nice kurti top [tunic] to cover my thighs... there's no excuse to look a mess, you know, I've always got some new shoes and nice jewelry on...

Modest dress for *H.* are clothes that cover the body, regardless of their style or geographical origin. Stating her English identity, she describes items with which she culturally identifies, while implicitly highlighting the complexities by referring to a kurti - an item with sub-continental origins – as 'English'. Aesthetics are also important, modesty and fashion unquestionably compatible. *H.*'s approach to headscarves was similar to *ZO.*'s,

I wear a scarf when I go for classes and to the mosque, but not all the time... I think I will at some point but when I feel ready, I'm still getting the basics right and learning more about Islam.

This statement was illustrated as she drove *Sh.* and me to *S.*'s house for a focus group - after parking the car she produced a scarf from her handbag, put it on with her trademark style, and explained,

*See, when I go to *S.*'s, which is quite a lot although we're never ever off the phone to each other... I wear a scarf. I go to lessons by her but also she keeps purdah and her husband's an [^]alim so it would be rude if I didn't.*

Here a headscarf is partly worn out of etiquette and concern for others' comfort. In addition it is something that can be worn, in different styles and ways or not worn at all, according to mood and situation - it is not a fixed appendage. During the subsequent focus group H. highlighted the different forms of dress within her Muslim community, using herself and best friend S. as examples:

See S., she keeps purdah and that's what she wants, I'm her best friend and I'm off out and about, I dress different, I work and that's what I want.

K. also wore a scarf, as she described, *part-time*,

I definitely want to wear hijab, like today when I met you at the station I put one on and sometimes I'll go to the supermarket... It's so nice when you're wearing it, other Muslims say salaam, you feel you're recognized... I love being a Muslim and I want people to know I'm proud.

Hijab can therefore be used as a tool of communication and signifier of identity and belonging: a positive identifier to other Muslims and way of communicating pride in a Muslim identity to people in general. The only participants who spoke of pressure from within the Muslim community was Z. and M. For example Z. said,

It took me years before wearing hijab... I always felt it was something in the religion that I'd do in my own time, and that's why it took so long, I felt it was a commitment, you don't want wear it and then take it off again... But there was pressure, or at least I felt there was, because people I knew would go on about it quite a lot... thinking back that might not've helped. You're not going to wear it because someone tells you to and when there's pressure you have to ignore it - what's the point if you're doing it for other than Allah?

M. compared the convert experience to that of born Muslims:

Other than the odd weirdo controlling husband, you know the paranoid insecure ones who won't let their wife out of sight and start telling her she should wear niqab or stay at home, you don't hear of people being forced to wear hijab... Yeah, I think for converts people are just really nice about it, you certainly don't get women forcing each other in the mosque! ... it's definitely women in countries who make women wear it, or families and husbands, so I think that pressure affects born Muslims more.

Peer pressure did not result in Z. wearing hijab, her choice to do so focused on two elements: feeling ready for a commitment to change her dress code on a permanent basis - Z. describes her style as *covering my curves, generally Western with long tops like kurtis and the odd shalwar kameez* and wears a head scarf - and doing so on religious/spiritual grounds for God. This religious aspect was paramount in all the participants' attitudes to wearing hijab- like the foundations of belief and faith for the conversion process, hijab was viewed as primarily religious with additional secondary aspects.

Thus, the primary discourse promoting hijab was viewed as Islam, in which there was no negative pressure, while regulatory discourses were seen as ineffectual irritations rather than serious and problematic pressures. This research did not include the experiences of born Muslims either in Britain or in other countries, however based on available literature M.'s analysis - that women born in Muslim countries or Muslim families are more likely to face pressure to wear hijab - rings true.

For some participants wearing hijab on a permanent basis, negative discourses from within the community were of a different nature. Although some muhajiba participants reflected K.'s positive experiences of being identified as Muslim by other Muslims, such as L. who said,

...because as soon as another Muslim sees you they know you're a sister, you get so much more smiles and salaam ...

and discounts in shops, you know, that sort of thing... It's as if you've got one of those supermarket loyalty cards, a Muslim card, except it's made of cloth and it's on your head.

- a number of women spoke of prejudice from Muslims against hijab. Z. for example described the reaction of some members of her husbands family:

They hate me wearing it! I think I embarrass them, they think it's backward, not part of Islam... and I'm sure half of it's because they're too bothered about what non-Muslims think and don't want to be different. It's really sad. I mean, one of them is actually disgusted by hijab - I mean that's an extreme reaction from a person who doesn't know anything about Islam, never mind one who was born Muslim...I get the impression they blame it on convert syndrome.

Am. spoke of similar experiences:

You'd think it was only non-Muslims who hate hijab, but some of the worst comments I've got are from born Muslims. One man at work came up to me just after I'd started wearing it and really sneered, 'what are you wearing that for?'... And then I've had really snobby women asking in a similar way, with total disdain. You can see them making eyes at each other at parties... It's frustrating at times, but most of the time it just makes me feel extra defiant.

This pressure against hijab, like the pressure to wear it, was experienced by participants in a negative way, but did not succeed in taking away agency or reducing power. On the contrary, interaction with regulatory discourses can result in a strengthening of women's ideas: they do not become objects or victims, but remain independent, resistive agents.

Negative regulatory discourses that impact most heavily on participants, and, I would argue on all Muslim women in Britain, are

those external to the Ummah, constructed in an exclusionary way as 'Western'. These dominant discourses are extremely powerful as they are embedded in the social structures of British society. As previously discussed, in the present day and throughout history, Western discourses on Islam and Muslims have been varied in their focus - compare present day fears of 'Islamic terrorism'⁶⁰⁰ with the Victorian fantasies of the sexually decadent harem⁶⁰¹ - but united in their overwhelmingly negative view.

A particularly pervasive and effective motif in current discourse is the headscarf, the metonym for all covering and all Muslim women. Specifically, hijab is viewed as a tool of oppression by which the homogenised Muslim Woman is physically and metaphorically subjugated by Islam/The Muslim Man⁶⁰². In this discourse the covering of the female body is a covering perpetrated by and for the cause of patriarchy, a sign of backward barbarity and weak, sexually rampant masculinity dominating a weak, sexually enslaved femininity.

This type of discourse, which features in both modernist and Orientalist writings⁶⁰³ has been understood by some authors as being rooted in a general Western tendency 'to impose Christian [Byzantine] constructions on Islamic understandings'⁶⁰⁴. This is a two-fold explanation in which both history and religious belief are involved. 'The West', defined against an equally fixed and homogenised 'East'⁶⁰⁵ can be generalised in terms of geography and socio-political thought as predominantly Christian in tradition, with a more recent atheist influence. From this perspective the Prophet Muhammad is viewed as a false prophet and thus to a greater or lesser degree, Islam a belief to be discredited.

⁶⁰⁰ Franks, M. 2000:924

⁶⁰¹ El Guindi, F. 1999:23

⁶⁰² Dwyer, C. 1999:7

⁶⁰³ Zayzafoon, L.B.Y. 2005:19; Franks, M. 2000:918

⁶⁰⁴ El Guindi, F. 1999:31

⁶⁰⁵ Abu Lughod, L. 1993:10

Within this tradition is the low status view of women that Western feminists have fought and continue to battle against, traceable to the great cultural influences of the Byzantine Empire, in which women were viewed as inferior beings to men⁶⁰⁶. Similarly, the concept of honour/shame found in the cultural discourses of the European Mediterranean⁶⁰⁷ is also inappropriately assumed to be a specifically Muslim understanding⁶⁰⁸. However, these theories do not explain the particular disdain for Muslim women, or the differences in attitudes to hijab so vilified in contrast to the wimple of a nun or the portrayals of a well-covered Virgin Mary.

A stronger explanation for the Western discourse on hijab can be explained through the concept of Orientalism, the negative racialisation⁶⁰⁹ and otherisation of Islam and Muslims. Even the Western view of dress centered on a concept of 'fashion' can be understood against the binaries of otherisation: fashion has been reserved as a mark of the 'civilised'⁶¹⁰ while hijab is viewed as an anathema to fashion. The Orientalist attitudes towards hijab are comparable to Levy's 'anthro-porn' rhetoric on Chinese foot binding: 'a titillating blend of exotified difference and moral horror'⁶¹¹.

Within this 'misogynist Eurocentrism'⁶¹², hijab is a useful symbol, the oppressed Muslim woman an emotive and potent theme. Bullock suggests that such a discourse is part of a wider struggle for power in a global context, the 'rhetoric... of the Western maintenance of its global hegemony'⁶¹³. In the case of France, hijab has been the center of a physical battle for power: having resisted the colonial power by using their hijab to transport weaponry, Algerian women were subjected to the 'Battle of the Veil'⁶¹⁴ in which their hijab was publicly and forcibly removed to chants of 'Vive l'Algérie

⁶⁰⁶ Ahmed, L. 1992:27 citing Gosdidier de Matons 1967:28-30; El Guindi, F. 1999:19-20 citing Brown 1988

⁶⁰⁷ For example Campbell, J. 1964; Sabbah, F.A. 1984

⁶⁰⁸ Eicher, J. 1995:30; El Guindi, F. 1999:79

⁶⁰⁹ For a discussion on the perceived 'foreignness' of Islam see Bullock, K. 2003:35

⁶¹⁰ Brydon, A. & Niessen, S. 1998:xii

⁶¹¹ Brydon, A. 1998:13 in Brydon, A. & Niessen, S. 1998

⁶¹² Dayan-Herzbrun, S. 2000:77; El Guindi, F. 1999:23-46

⁶¹³ Bullock, K. 2003:xxxiv

⁶¹⁴ El Guindi 1999:172 citing Lehrman, H. 1958:14-18

française'⁶¹⁵. The open hostility against hijab was in part justified by the French as the freeing of the Muslim Woman from the oppression of the Muslim Man / Islam.

Hijab from this perspective is a tool and symbol of the enemy, the barbarian Other from whom power must be kept. In this frame, Zayzafoon argues that 'the stereotype of the 'Muslim woman's oppression' was used to disenfranchise Algerian men and justify the concept of 'l'Algérie française'⁶¹⁶. I would argue that it is precisely this discourse which is reproduced in the present day, the anti-hijab stance of various governments justified as 'saving Muslim women' part of the portrayal of the Muslim presence as a danger within that must be kept in check.

An example of the present attitudes to hijab is the 2004 French ban on headscarves in the workplace and in schools. It is justified officially in two ways: firstly, that it has a *caractère ostentatoire*, ostentatious character, and is therefore 'an instrument of proselytism'⁶¹⁷ running contrary to the state concept of secularism, and secondly, under the banner of feminism, is attacked for its representation of women as submissive to men - a backward, foreign symbol contrary to 'French Values'⁶¹⁸. The feminist banner is also held up in other European countries towing the same line, including Belgium from where Anne Marie Lizin, an MP and member of the UN's forum for women and who was contacted on the subject of hijab for this study, is based. In an exchange of emails⁶¹⁹, Lizin justified a resolution that she had drafted for the Belgium parliament as follows:

The problem of the headscarf [sic] is the fact that it expresses the inferiority of the women in the muslim society. The origin of the headscraf [sic] is based on unequal practices. It officially shows the domination of the man, and the woman's

⁶¹⁵ Zayzafoon, L.B.Y. 2005:67

⁶¹⁶ Zayzafoon, L.B.Y. 2005:39; Delphy, C. 2004; El Guindi, F. 1999:170

⁶¹⁷ Dayan-Herzbrun, S. 2000:73

⁶¹⁸ Bullock, K. 2003:xxxvii; Dayan-Herzbrun, S. 2000: 73, 74

⁶¹⁹ See Appendix II

obligation to execute her husband's orders, sexual desires and authority. This is precisely unacceptable in democratic countries. Our respect of democratic and constitutional [sic] values do not allow them to create, in our democratic societies, a inequality [sic] between men and women. Our respect of those democratic values impose us to react against this practice.

This argument reflects the notion that all Muslim women, oppressed by tyrannical Muslim men including husbands, fathers and brothers, are inferior in their societies and within Islam, all of which is incompatible with 'democratic' i.e. 'Western' values. Crucially, Lizin goes on to argue that within Muslim communities, women have historically had 'no other choice than [to] hide themselves' and as such, wearing hijab in the present day 'can not be considered as a choice'. This contestation therefore becomes a denial of a Muslim woman's agency and right to choose, justified in the name of feminism and democracy.

Lizin's conceptualisation of feminism is not unusual - in France, one of the very few feminist voices speaking against the monopoly on meanings and subsequent ban on hijab appears to be Christine Delphy and her forum *Féministes Pour L'Égalité* [Feminists for Equality]. Strong parallels can be drawn between Delphy's descriptions of French attitudes and those experienced by the participants in Britain:

To the majority of the French, by wearing the scarf, women of North African descent are making an absurd choice, choosing oppression when they could choose freedom. If it were only incomprehensible: but worse, it is like a slap in the face to them. By wearing the scarf, these women thumb their noses at French society. As the French-French see it, they turn down the opportunity offered to them by the host country to shake off the shackles of their parents' backward culture, to become "liberated women", to become "French women". This is incomprehensible to the French-French, including the

*majority of feminists. Most people, in spite of the evidence, insist that they must be pressured by their fathers and brothers. When veiled women say they are obeying God, not men, nobody believes them. When they say they wear the scarf of their own free will, people shake their heads.*⁶²⁰

Against such a discourse, the convert can only be understood as deranged or a defector. While Britain does not have such ingrained and formalised political prejudices towards hijab, having followed a model of multi-culturalism rather than assimilation and laïcité, similar sentiments have been revealed to participants in this study and can be viewed in the British media. It also highlights hijab's politicisation⁶²¹: between the regulating discourses from within and outside the Muslim community, a Muslim woman's choice to wear or not wear will be viewed in part as political.

Other feminists accept the notion of choice and women's own notions of power and resistance⁶²² through hijab to a degree, but conclude that 'pro-veiling apologias'⁶²³ are of limited value to feminism, overshadowed by hijab's symbolism of 'patriarchy' and 'heterosexual femininity'⁶²⁴, elitism, oppression through 'shrouding' and servility⁶²⁵.

Participants, whatever their form or of lack of hijab, confirmed the pressure of these discourses. Those interacting in public without hijab highlighted the prejudices, such as K. who explained:

One of the reasons I don't feel ready is I know how people'll react, like my family and people at work, and I don't feel strong enough to deal with that and battle with them... You hear people going on about how bad Islam is or discussing so called Islamic terrorism and you get a pit in your stomach. At

⁶²⁰ Delphy, C. 2003:13

⁶²¹ Dwyer, C. 1999:18; Franks, M. 2000:919

⁶²² Dayan-Herzbrun, S. 2000:77,78,79

⁶²³ Ghazal Read, J. & Bartkowski, J.P. 2000: 400

⁶²⁴ Dwyer, C. 1999:9

⁶²⁵ Ghazal Read, J. & Bartkowski, J.P. 2000: 395, 401

the moment people don't know I'm Muslim unless I tell them, people I know will be fine about it... it's easy to hide if you don't want them to know. But if I'm wearing hijab I've got to deal with it.

The prejudices inherent in regulatory discourses therefore act as obstacles to free agency. While *K.* still intends to wear hijab, and does so amongst strangers, the discourses have made it more difficult for her to wear it in front of individuals she knows as it may harm her relationships. The situation created is thus compared to a battle in which she must defend her beliefs and choices and fight for acceptance. By not wearing a headscarf, a 'white', British convert woman can pass under the discourses' radar: she cannot be immediately identified and disadvantaged, as she appears to be from i.e. can be ascribed to a dominant group and thus has time to judge a relationship before choosing whether to impart that she is Muslim. As *Am.* observed,

It was a lot easier before I wore hijab, when people found out I was Muslim they just asked loads of questions or thought 'oh its just J. [her non-Muslim name], we've all got our differences'. People tend to be a lot more open-minded. But now I feel I've got to make a lot more effort, because there'll always be some people who'll have judged you on first glance.

Such comments illustrate the immediate negative visual impact hijab holds for those internalising dominant discourses, the effect of which halts or slows down relationships with Muslim women who may have otherwise been viewed as more socially acceptable. Being Muslim may be a problem, but being identifiably so increases the difficulties by reducing a woman's power to manipulate ascribed identities within social relations.

In the case of participants who intended to become 'full-time hijabis'⁶²⁶ there was a unanimous sense of needing to build up to, or 'become ready' for hijab. This can be explained on two levels: on one hand hijab was seen as simultaneously less important than the basic pillars of Islamic practice, but on the other the difficulties facing muhajibat was viewed as needing extra determination and strength. As such, participants often suggested that hijab symbolised a higher level of religious devotion, or transition in religious practice⁶²⁷: a religiously small act has taken on great significance in a hostile context.

It can therefore be argued that this symbolic status has come about as a result of the resolve needed in countries such as Britain, France and Turkey, where dominant discourses fight against the wearing and wearers of hijab. Where headscarves are fashionable or normative, the sense of piety is reduced, and in the case of countries in which hijab is enforced, the struggle is located in the lack of wearing.

For women wearing hijab the discourses can be seen as responsible for a range of negative experiences, their appearance as Muslims apparently making them targets for abuse from strangers, both verbal and physical. *Am.* describes this sort of abuse:

When you're obviously Muslim you're an easy target for anyone who hates Islam or anyone they think is 'foreign'. I've been spat on, I've been called a stupid terrorist bitch, told to fuck off back to my own country...

Similarly *Sh.* said,

'White-Paki terrorists' is the general gist of abuse ... people like that are just ignorant racists.

⁶²⁶ words of A.

⁶²⁷ This aspect of hijab is discussed by Brenner. S, 1996:673; Dwyer, C. 1999:18

Al. had also experienced verbal abuse:

The only time I got really frightened was just outside Paddington... this random man suddenly came out of nowhere and started shouting right in my face, 'do you think our boys abused those Iraqis, do you? Do you? He just kept shouting 'do you?'... he seemed seriously unhinged. I think he was talking about the Abu Ghraib abuse, it was around that time. I thought maybe he was going to stab me or something, and no one stopped to help me. He kept following me until I got on a bus in tears.

Participants also reported examples of muhajibat being physically assaulted. For example A. said,

No one's ever attacked me, but a friend had some young boys try and pull her scarf off and my friend's friend got bottled on a bus in Glasgow. The man sitting behind her was drinking on the bus and just smashed it over her head. She was knocked unconscious but she was OK, I mean physically ... although I imagine she didn't want to stay here, she's an overseas student.

This account of serious physical assault illustrates the extreme consequences of embedded prejudices reproduced and generated in Islamophobic and racist dominant discourses. These attacks should not reduce the significance of more common, less serious experiences, as these still impact negatively. Z. mentioned,

What's sad is when people get up and move away from you on the tube or cross the road. I've had it quite a few times and you know you're not being paranoid 'cos they look at you in this awful way or mutter to their friends about 'those people'... Or even when people joke with each other or say stuff like 'why do they always look such a mess, that headgear is awful'... People use the word 'they' as if they're referring to criminals or scum.

Participants described such jibes in passing, but the act of remembering and retelling demonstrates that facing such attitudes on a regular basis also impacts negatively. The base of each joke or comment is rooted in the assumption that the women are outsiders, Others to be mocked or criticised. The above comment also reveals that part of the aversion to hijab lies in being wrapped up i.e. wearing too much. Just as the woman wearing 'too little' is criticised and branded as 'tarty' or 'slaggish', the woman deemed wearing too much defies the norm. It would be interesting to investigate the attitudes against this new social taboo: like her 'underdressed' sister would the muhajiba be identified in the reverse sexual terms as 'frigid'? Or is she just unfashionably frumpy?

These non-physical, more subtle manifestations of the discourses are felt to be potentially more harmful if family and friends reiterate them: R. said,

It's not so much random abuse but the attitude I get from the people I love. It's really awful to know that your mum has a serious problem with how you look and what you're doing.

Similarly Al. commented,

One of the worst things when you start wearing hijab is that suddenly the people who seemed to be fine about you being Muslim before, suddenly have a problem with it. It's as if the scarf makes you alien to them, and it's hurtful when they're your friends and family, people you love.

Although the alienating, and sometimes threatening, attitudes towards the participants are likely to impact negatively, the women should not be viewed as victims. Such accounts were used to illustrate the problematic aspects of ascription and prejudices stemming from the dominant discourses with which they interact. Yet, the incidents are contextualised with their overwhelmingly positive experiences as Muslim converts, identities they enjoy, choose to hold and actively generate.

Yet, it must be noted that, as Bullock points out, it is too simplistic to dismiss these discourses as those of Western⁶²⁸ outsiders. As has been discussed, voices from within the Muslim world also argue against hijab in relation to the position of women, based on analyses of religious texts⁶²⁹ and social practices⁶³⁰. However, many only serve to reflect the prejudice of Orientalist and modernist discourses⁶³¹. Mernissi for example, depicts the muhajiba as 'that submissive, marginal creature who buries herself and only goes out into the world timidly and huddled in her veils', a 'mutilated companion' for the Muslim man⁶³². Similarly, Amir Taheri, the Iranian journalist feted prominently in the American media in recent times, views women wearing the hijab as unknowingly complicit through the practice of unjustified and oppressive patriarchy⁶³³.

Similarly, several participants in this study gave examples of insults against their hijab by fellow Muslims for being 'backward'. Many of these voices can be viewed as complicit insiders whose 'authentic' words are used to strengthen dominant regulatory discourses and prejudices. In some cases the perceived authenticity and insider status allows the voicing of opinions so extreme that they would be censured or branded bigoted if raised by 'outsiders'.

Within these contexts, it is not surprising that hijab has become a 'feminist issue', yet feminists aligning themselves with these arguments are ultimately tapping into two very anti-feminist, power-laden discourses: not only the racism of Orientalist perspectives but also the modern exploitation of the female body. By aligning their arguments with those using women and their bodies / dress as a battleground, feminists become as exploitive as those they wish to fight. Not only is agency and choice taken from women when they are forced to wear or take off hijab, the focus of the arguments - the female body - serves to objectify. The idea that the 'Western' ideal

⁶²⁸ Bullock, K. 2003: xxxvi; Ghazal Read, J. & Bartkowski, J.P. 2000: 406

⁶²⁹ Ahmed, L. 1992; Barlas, A. 2002; Karam, A.M.1998; Mernissi, F. 1987; Wahdud-Muhsin, A. 1993

⁶³⁰ Afshar. H. 1993,1998

⁶³¹ El Guindi, F. 1999:25

⁶³² Mernissi 1991:194

⁶³³ Taheri, A. 2003: *This is not Islam* Bendor Associates

of freedom lies in the exploitative exposure of women's bodies is not unusual - Salman Rushdie's recent pro-porn polemic⁶³⁴ is yet another branch of the same discourse.

As has been argued in Chapter 1, feminism, in order to fulfill its function i.e. *to be feminist*, must accept the agency and informed choices of women from all backgrounds and resist arguments that exploit the women they should be supporting. That is, when a Muslim woman wears hijab by choice, her decision must be upheld and not undermined. This does not mean that feminists must use hijab as a banner of liberation - although some do highlight its feminist possibilities⁶³⁵ - rather the meanings behind hijab must be put into the context of the time, place and individuals involved⁶³⁶.

In relation to dress and the female body specifically, many feminists have argued against the exposure of the female body to the inherently powerful gaze⁶³⁷. Franks has noted that the Western tradition including British society 'requires that women be the object of the gaze'⁶³⁸, which is also applicable to the Orientalist desire to view Muslim women in particular⁶³⁹. Both narratives are iconoclastically captured in the bare breasts of 'saucy' British seaside postcards typical of twentieth century and the colonial postcards of French-occupied Algeria⁶⁴⁰. In the context of exposure and objectification, dress is viewed as both complicit and resistant. On one hand, feminists have located a strand of liberation in the struggle against fashion as a tool of the powerful gaze and associated privilege⁶⁴¹. On the other, dress can be viewed as a tool to subvert - hijab for example, depending on its context, acting as a literal and metaphorical barrier to 'disrupt'⁶⁴² and 'reverse'⁶⁴³ the gaze.

⁶³⁴ Rushdie, S. 2004.

⁶³⁵ Abu Odeh, L. 1993:34; Bullock, K. 2002

⁶³⁶ Bullock, K. 2002:xvii; Delphy, C. 2003:22

⁶³⁷ Foucault, M. 1973 & 1977

⁶³⁸ Franks, M. 2000:920

⁶³⁹ Alloula, M. 1986; El Guindi, F. 1999:23

⁶⁴⁰ Alloula, M. 1986

⁶⁴¹ Brydon, A. 1998:6 and Li, Xiaoping. 1998:72 in Brydon, A. & Niessen, S. 1998

⁶⁴² Franks, M. 2000:920

⁶⁴³ Afshar, H. 1998; Franks, M. 2000:920

In relation to fashion, modern forms of hijab, especially styles worn by members of Marxist influenced groups such as the Brotherhood, has also been constructed as anti-fashion, freeing women from the beauty myth. In contrast, other women view the wearing of hijab as a tool of beauty⁶⁴⁴ and point to its changing forms as fashion⁶⁴⁵. What really matters is how the women involved construct the meanings. As other research has found⁶⁴⁶, the women who participated in this study viewed dress and hijab in varying ways- some did not wear hijab regularly, while others did, and the styles, meanings and times it was worn differed.

While all the participants believed that hijab was an aspect in the practicing of Islam as understood in the Quran and Sunnah, and for this reason either wore it or intended to, there were a number of secondary reasons for doing so. These can be further illustrated by the following examples, which participants gave in addition to those mentioned previously. Hijab is viewed as demonstrating a woman's specifically Islamic identity, including affiliation to the Ummah and a commitment to practicing the religion⁶⁴⁷. In addition to the words mentioned previously in this chapter, R. said,

Well I love being Muslim, and wearing hijab lets me show that ... not in an aggressive way, I don't think of it like a flag, or something exclusive, just as a positive part of my identity, a part of which is Muslim.

The sense of Ummah was highlighted by Sh. who stated,

Hijab gives you a sense of Ummah. When we're identifiable, we can communicate, even if it's just a smile over a shop counter, but also if you need help.

Similarly Al. said,

⁶⁴⁴ See for example Wikkan, U. 1982

⁶⁴⁵ Dwyer, C. 1999:9

⁶⁴⁶ Ghazal Read, J. & Bartkowski, J.P. 2000: 396 referring to Fernea, E. 1993:122

⁶⁴⁷ This has also been described in other studies such as Dwyer, C. 1999:6; Franks, M. 2000:918; Ghazal Read, J. & Bartkowski, J.P. 2000: 399, 403

Seeing other hijabis gives you a real feeling of sisterhood ... we know we share something fundamental.

On increasing levels of Islamic practices *Am.* recalled,

When I started wearing it I felt a lot more aware of practicing. Especially when you're not used to it and you fiddle around, and notice it all the time, you remember to pray on time and behave well.

Likewise, *S.* said,

I think wearing it makes you feel more responsible for your actions, you're obviously Muslim so whatever you do people are going to judge you as a Muslim, and probably Islam too.

Hijab was also viewed as a helpful reminder to behave modestly and humbly for those wearing it and those viewing the *muhajiba*, and in so doing articulated a freedom through the regulation of sexual sociality: hijab reducing unwanted sexual interactions⁶⁴⁸. *A.* articulated this, saying,

Another thing is that it reminds people about being modest. When you're wearing it you're definitely more aware and men, Muslims and non-Muslims act differently around you. They're more respectful and shy and I think that that's a benefit for everyone! I much prefer that than being whistled at or having my bum felt up and 'get a load of that lads'.

On a similar note, as described in Chapter 5 particularly by *R.*, hijab was also viewed as a tool in reversing gaze and avoiding sexual objectification. In this way, participants spoke of the 'freedom' inherent in covering⁶⁴⁹. *N.* stated,

⁶⁴⁸ Described by Franks, M. 2000:921; Ghazal Read, J. & Bartkowski, J.P. 2000: 399 & 404

⁶⁴⁹ These aspects of hijab have also been described in studies such as Franks, M. 2000:921; Ghazal Read, J. & Bartkowski, J.P. 2000: 405; Taarji. 1990:277-278 in Dayan-Herzbrun, S. 2000:77

Covering everything is seen as oppression, but I think it's actually very powerful. I think a lot of British culture allows for women to be objectified and over sexualised ... hijab is an antidote to that.

Zh. argued,

Hijab desexualises you in a positive way- you choose how much you want to conceal or reveal your body, and in that way, how much others can see of you, you're controlling what they see.

Hijab was also seen as subverting society's expectations of women's appearance. Discussing her wearing of niqab, S. said,

Wearing niqab is spiritually fulfilling but it's also very private, and I like that. There's no pressure to behave or look a certain way, I could be dressed for a wedding or still in my pyjamas, and no one would know.

As concluded in the other chapters of this thesis, dominant and regulatory discourses rarely reflect people's lived reality. In the case of hijab, whether they wear it or not, women in Britain are forced to interact with discourses promoting negative understandings of hijab, outside or within the Muslim community. To a lesser extent, but also important in its attempt to control, are discourses from within the Ummah that seek to pressurise women into wearing hijab. Whatever the perspective of these narratives, women must and do seek to subvert the attempts to deny their choices and refuse their status as conscious, rational agents.

Feminism must play a role in this subversion by supporting women, whatever their choices with regards to hijab may be, and recognise that for some women, hijab is a tool of emancipation, just as for others it is not. The experiences of liberation and oppression reside in the meanings that hijab holds for a woman, and not in its physical manifestation as the clothes covering a woman's head or body.

For the participants in this study, hijab held multiple meanings, and the experiences of not / wearing it were varied. It was worn for and in the practice of Islam, it was used to subvert norms and challenge discourses, and it was used in the construction of their complex, hybrid identities⁶⁵⁰. As such, while the dominant discourse in Britain generally frames hijab as a way of rendering women invisible and silent, the very same discourse creates a contradictory situation for 'white' converts and other Muslim women: it is a choice of dress that demands a level of courage and non-conformity⁶⁵¹.

⁶⁵⁰ See Dwyer, C. 1999:5,6,14, 15

⁶⁵¹ Franks, M. 2000:917,920

Conclusions

The ideas and experiences of the women who participated in this study may contribute to the understanding and promotion of feminism and its aim to overcome dominating forms of power. Their examples suggest that feminisms can be realised through the continued recognition of women's diversities and the acceptance of difference within feminisms. The embracing of diversity reflects the need for women's choices to be acknowledged and supported. Feminisms act as networks to exchange and generate ideas, understand the social apparatuses that dominate us, and work actively to dismantle them. In addition, women's choices empower them as individuals and help others to make their own choices.

Through dialogue with eighteen participants and an analysis of their ideas and experiences, it is understood that Islamic feminism exists in theory and practice, and shapes individuals' daily lives. The women participating in this study fight for the lives they wish to lead using an Islamic paradigm in which they define themselves as independent but complementary to men. For them, Islam *is* feminist, a flexible and broad framework providing a series of rights and roles while simultaneously supporting different lifestyles and choices. Through the application and teaching of these God-given rights and social perspectives, the women act as feminists.

Within such a context, feminisms may be more able to respond to the needs of women and grow further both as a concept and a movement by accepting the possibilities of internal diversities, including Islamic feminisms. If they exclude difference, feminists will act in a non-feminist way, reproducing the narratives of regulatory discourses.

These observations reflect the importance of understanding the diversity of women as a group, whose label 'woman' is experienced in diverse and complex ways which cannot be considered homogenous or static. As such, like the women who participated in

this study, to ascribe similar labels to them does not negate the diversity of their lives or the ongoing processes of generating and developing identities. The positive view of difference is an important tool in the women's subversion of regulatory discourses. While narratives are promoted in order to control individuals and groups, people's realities undermine the narrow definitions of belonging. That is, despite dominant ideas about the way they live their lives and self-identify, women negotiate their worlds as Muslim converts in Britain as they see fit, without experiencing internal or external 'clashes'. Throughout the thesis, the themes discussed by participants were deeply interconnected with the early discussions of feminisms, the Islamic framework and the notion of lived realities versus regulatory discourses.

In terms of the subversive nature of women's realities, Chapter 6 explored the ease with which the participants negotiate the complex facets of self as converts to Islam. Conversion to Islam is a complex and individual process. To convert is to actively, decisively and positively change one's life: the participants have embraced something in which they believe and which also holds a variety of attractions, from spiritual agency to community support. In this way, they can be understood as sharing core understandings of Islam as belief and practice and framing their conversions with the concept of *Hidayah*. Yet, the women reveal their secondary motivations and paths to Islam to be highly varied. The diversity is reflected in their different attitudes and ideas, which demand from feminisms and the society around them, recognition and space.

The lived realities of these women contradict many of the academic and popular stereotypes of what a convert to Islam might be. Beyond and apart from the controlling narratives of the Bushes and Bin Ladens, people lead their complex lives without struggling with 'irreconcilable' beliefs, practices, cultures and identities. The participants' concepts of spiritual agency, their insistence in choosing to become and staying Muslim in a framework that combines faith in *Hidayah* and the secondary factors of lifestyle and sense of self all work against the dominant discourses of their

socialities and academic labelling. Their stories are therefore not only important for the production of feminist knowledge, but contribute to recognised, diversified feminist theory and action.

In addition, Chapter 4 develops methodologies that allow feminist analyses to remain rigorous, and at the same time inclusive of women's own understandings and conceptualisations. In particular, the accepting of *Hidayah* as the framework of conversion while leaving room for more 'conventional' modes of sociological understandings attests to the success of feminist conceptualisation and methodology.

Chapter 5's exploration of identities, which exposes the huge incongruity between the ascriptions of regulatory discourses and the self-identifications of real people centres around the participants' views that there is no conflict in being a 'white', British, Muslim, woman. These are some of many facets of identity that each individual generates, mutates, conceals and reveals through living, the reality of identities combinable and multiple. By understanding these interactions and proclaiming women's identity defiance, feminism challenges domination and supports women. Again in relation to this research, such theoretical activism is achieved by making room for Islamic feminisms, accepting the choices of converts to Islam and in standing by, reinforcing and making known the women's lived realities.

Some of these ideas have been tested in the discussion of hijab in Chapter 6. As a form of dress, hijab is unusually saturated with, and has thus come to symbolise, contradictory meanings. For the dominant regulatory discourses in Britain and the West in general, it is a symbol of the Other and can therefore only be understood in negative terms. Dominant feminisms, unable to break free from their cultural heritages, have echoed these perceptions and in doing so in such a wholesale manner, historically failed Muslim women who choose to wear hijab. Relating hijab as an example in the case for diversity, feminism may act for women by unpacking the different discourses on hijab - the otherising dominant British narratives,

patriarchal Muslim discourses that seek to force hijab on women, and the perspectives of Islam itself - while recognising the varied meanings of hijab held by women. Hijab is viewed by the participants in this study as an item of clothing imbued with various positive meanings, regardless of whether or not or how they wear it. Their context is one of choice, and for some is an explicit tool for emancipation. It can therefore be argued that hijab is a feminist issue, not in the traditional, imperialist sense, but in that feminism has a duty is to recognise the choice of these women and the nuanced meanings of hijab and other social objects.

Thus the analyses of themes amplify and expand on the original propositions of the thesis. The women's ideas and experiences, combined with both their own conceptualisations and my analysis contribute to the understanding that there is space in feminist theory and activism for Islam, and space within Islam for feminism. Feminism from this perspective is therefore viewed as necessarily embracing diversity, choice and agency within its broad borders. The participants find emancipation within an Islamic framework: through the core of rights and entitlements, spiritual agency and the construction of new ways of being, acting and identifying which break free from the constricting norms of their socialities. Not only do they act as examples for feminism, but as feminists they work explicitly from their chosen positions to empower themselves as individuals and work with and for other women to generate new and empowering views and modes of living.

I do not claim a definitive understanding of the themes explored in this thesis. However, a small qualitative study can legitimately act as a snapshot, highlighting the complex realities of a group of women whose ideas and experiences may be actively engaged in dialogue with the theoretical issues. For feminism, such interaction allows theory and practical activism to be bridged, and as such holds value.

In addition, my analyses may not only differ from those of other researchers, but also differ from some of the conclusions the women themselves may draw. This is part of the ongoing dialogues between

different researchers and participants - including between the participants in this study and myself - which generates and revitalises feminist knowledge. As such, the thesis presents and explores different possibilities, possibilities that will be further increased and enriched by feminism's continuing inclusivity of different women, including Muslims and Islamic feminists, in the future.

Each woman's approach to faith and liberation is different, yet they do not expect to impose their ways on others. Their ideas and experiences act to enrich feminist understandings of diversity and in doing so help to disrupt the dominant discourses. Individuals, such as the participants in this study, actively disprove the scare mongering ascription of identities and in doing so lead the way as positive role models in negotiating our ways through a post 9/11 world.

As A. commented after reading these conclusions:

Despite all the talk, we all make our own worlds in our own ways.

Appendix I: Biographies

The purpose of these brief biographies is to serve as an introduction to the women against which their words may be contextualised. Their names have been abbreviated throughout the thesis and certain details left out in order to protect their privacy.

A. is a twenty-three year old graduate who works fulltime outside the home and recently married a born Muslim. She converted at the age of nineteen having become interested in Islam the previous year through her sister, who is also a convert.

AB. is a single, twenty-five year old student who converted to Islam at seventeen. She works part time to fund her studies.

AI. is twenty-eight and converted at university. She has been working full time since graduating. At the time of research she got engaged to her boyfriend, a born-Muslim.

Am. is thirty-six, and converted at thirty-three. She is married and works part time outside the home.

E. is forty-two and converted twenty-three years ago. She is married with children, and works as an advocate for the Muslim community, writing, speaking at conferences and organising community events.

H. is a twenty-nine year old homemaker and converted at twenty-six. Over the period of research she married her boyfriend, a born Muslim, who supports her financially.

I. is twenty-nine and converted at sixteen. She is married, works full time and writes for a number of Muslim publications.

K. is a twenty-four year old, single postgraduate researcher. She first learned about Islam through friends at university and converted at twenty-three.

L. is twenty-three. She was unable to find employment after college, but had succeeded in starting her own business at the time of research. She is married to a born Muslim and converted six months before our first interview, a year into her marriage.

M. is a thirty-one year old home maker with children She is also the full time carer for her eldest son. She is married to a born Muslim and converted at twenty-seven

N. is a single, nineteen year old student who had converted a few months before our first interview. She learned about Islam from her sister who is also a convert.

R. is a twenty-two year old medical student who converted in her first year of University after learning about Islam through friends. She is married to a convert who she studied with and who now supports them financially. She is pregnant with her first child.

Rh. is thirty-years old and converted at twenty-nine. She is a homemaker married to a born Muslim and lives with her in-laws.

S. is twenty-seven years old. She married and started her family shortly after graduating and is a homemaker. S. converted as a teenager, her mother and step-father are converts to Islam and her father was a born Muslim. S. teaches women in her community about Islam.

Sh. is thirty-four. She converted and married while at university. Having worked full time outside the home, she decided to become a homemaker after giving birth to her first child.

Z. converted at the age of eighteen and is now twenty-seven. She is married to a born Muslim and works full time.

Zh. is thirty-seven. She converted at twenty-nine after becoming curious about and researching Islamic belief. She is not married

and has children, working as a homemaker and part time outside the home.

ZO. is twenty-nine and converted three months before our interview. She is single and works fulltime outside the home.

Appendix II: Example of Ahadith on Innovation

They include the following sahih ahadith:

Muslim related from the route of Jarir Ibn ^Abdullah, that the Prophet said:

" من سن في الإسلام سنة حسنة
فله أجرها و أجر من عمل بها إلى يوم القيامة ،
لا ينقص من أجورهم شيء
و من سن في الإسلام سنة سيئة
فعلية وزرها ووزر من عمل بها إلى يوم القيامة
لا ينقص من أوزارهم شيء "

This means: 'The one who innovates a good innovation in *Islam* has its reward and the reward of those who would practice with it until the Day of Judgement without lessening the rewards of those who practice with it. The one who innovates the innovation of misguidance, would take the sin for it and the sin of those who practice with it until the Day of Judgement without lessening the sin of those who practice with it.'

This hadith is a foundation for those proving the validity good innovations in *Islam*. It is used to contextualise the following hadith related by at-Tirmidhiyy:

" و كل بدعة ضلالة "

This means that the Prophet said, 'Every innovation is misguidance.' Those who support innovation interpret this to mean that the Prophet was referring to innovations that contradict the Quran, ahadith, *ijma*^, and sayings of the Companions. Those who consider all innovation as unlawful, haram, interpret this hadith literally and disregard the former hadith.

Appendix III: Content of email from A.M. Lizin to L.Z. McDonald 12/2/04

Dear Ms McDonald,

The problem of the headscarf is the fact that it expresses the inferiority of the women in the muslim society. The origin of the headscarf is based on unequal practices. It officially shows the domination of the man, and the woman's obligation to execute her husband's orders, sexual desires and authority. This is precisely unacceptable in democratic countries. Our respect of democratic and constitutional values do not allow them to create, in our democratic societies, a inequality between men and women. Our respect of those democratic values impose us to react against this practice.

Women are not allowed to accept or, at least, to show such inequality between them and their husband (or brothers or fathers) in our democratic countries. It is time to replace the signification of headscarf in its context. At the origin, as I said, it was a consecration of inequality. But it was also to avoid to be agressed in street. In fact, women that didn't hide their body were considered as whole and were agressed. So, to be safe, they had no other choice than hide themselves. And more, they were obliged to hide their hair or more (there are some quaters in Belgium where muslim women are all hidden). That is why it can not be considered as a choice, since the beginning.

But be sure that my proposal is not against the muslim community. Multiculturality and ethnicity is a very important fact of the Belgian democracy, and it is important to preserve and defend it. And moreover, it is very important to protect this ethnicity from integrism and extremism, precisely through such intolerable practices against women.

For more information, I send in attachment my resolution, with all

argumentation in french.

I hope that I have been helpful to you. Wish you all the best in your work,

Yours sincerely,

Anne-Marie LIZIN

Glossary

Ayah: verse of the Quran

Bida[^]: Arabic for 'innovation' understood in religious terms as additional practices that the Prophet Muhammad did not do.

Fiqh: Islamic jurisprudence

Hadith, ahadith (pl): the recording of a saying or action of the Prophet Muhammad

Halal: permissible, lawful in Islam

Hijabi, Hijabis (pl): a woman who wears hijab (see muhajiba)

Ijma[^]: Arabic for 'consensus'

Ijtihad: the deduction of rulings from Islamic sources

Imam: a community leader such as the head of a mosque, or religious leader of Muslims in general. Used by Shia[^] Muslims to refer to individuals in their lineage of leaders

Jahiliya: Pre-Islamic times; ignorance

Madhhab: a school of jurisprudence

Mahr: the portion of wealth given to a wife on marriage by a husband on agreed terms.

Muhajiba, muhajibat (pl): a woman who wears hijab (see *hijabi*)

Mujtahid: the scholar who performs *ijtihad*, i.e. deduces rulings from Islamic sources

Nafaqah: financial support provided by a man to his wife and family

Nikah: the Islamic contractual marriage

Qur'an: The revelation from God, transmitted to the Prophet Muhammad through the Angel Jibril (Gabriel).

Sunnah: the way of the Prophet Muhammad, understood through his words and actions

Surah: chapter of the Quran

Tafsir : Quranic explanation, exegesis

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