

Review

An alternative perspective: Islam, identity, and gender migration of Sudanese Muslim women in the UK

Ameena Alrasheed.

University for Peace, United Nations Mandated University, San Jose, Costa Rica.

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This article is yet an attempt to provoke and stimulate minds, to seek an alternative understanding - an accurate one to the multiple nature of Islam. This is done by situating knowledge and mapping history, and including a minority of minorities. African Islam needs more articulation. Muslim women of Africa exist in Europe in silence. They face double/triple jeopardy generated from the interplay of racism and sexism and dominant policies that need to be challenged. Sudanese women in West Yorkshire are a representation of these women. Politics, state, religion, ethnicity, and social class seem to determine their position in West Yorkshire society, as it did for many other Muslim African women. Presenting them in this article is a step towards challenging the analogies drawn on them.

Key words: Identity, migration, Islam, gender, politics.

INTRODUCTION

They are married or single, divorced or widow mothers, girl daughters and older women; they are many but they are invisible as there is not enough data or sex disaggregated statistics on migrant women (UNPA Report, 2006).

This paper is an attempt to study a Minority Muslim group in the UK. The main question deals on how exile and living in West Yorkshire transformed Sudanese women's identity as Muslims, African, and Arabic speakers. The paper focuses on exploring the main factors behind immigration and living in West Yorkshire. It is organized around Sudanese women as African, Muslims and Arabic

speakers. The multi-faceted aspect of the particular Muslim identity is never researched but rather combined with the mainstream Muslim women from Asia. In other cases these women were categorized as African women, or as Arabic/Middle Eastern, neglecting the fact that these women cannot be identified in terms of one unified identity, ethnically, religiously, or otherwise. Many studies and presentations have been done concerning Muslim women and these have, in fact, focused on a particular category of Muslims, for example the dominant Asian Muslim women. However, in the background are other women who are Muslims and not Asian. Many of them are still un-researched and their numbers are on the

E-mail: ameena34@hotmail.com. Tel: (506)2205 9075, (506) 2249 3001. Fax: (506) 22491929.

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increase, but why do they migrate? What incentives do they have? How is it related to their gender and how does it affect them? These are questions that need to be tackled. Lewis's (1994) view on the issue of the Muslim community in Britain explains how their identity as Muslims is intrinsically related to the regions and areas they came from. Lewis (1994, p. 7) rightly states that:

In the late 1960s research had already shown that migrants were culturally embedded in communities, displaying distinct patterns of adaptation and group formation.

Lewis (1994) stresses further that the contribution of the British Muslim communities in understanding Muslims and Islam is limited to the nature of intellectual and cultural formation of religion and religious leadership in South Asia, since many Muslims born and educated in Britain are themselves from South Asian origin.

Hence, it is significant to present another example that reflects the diversity of the sectarian, regional and linguistic background of Muslim communities. Such a task is still far from being accomplished. Nevertheless, this study is an attempt to uncover and document another Muslim community, which differs in terms of ethnicity, linguistic, and cultural diversity, and to challenge the discourse of a main stream Islam that portrays Muslims as a one homogenous category.

The Sudanese women's history and their gender roles within their old patriarchal society demonstrate whether there is a trend among these women to use Islam as an identity which interprets their gender relations, and why. This is a point or a position that might help us in understanding how far these women would stand from the dominant mainstream Islam in West Yorkshire.

Tackling Islam and Muslim communities requires exploring and explaining the multifaceted nature of Islam in order to understand the diversity, difference and even contradictory positions of many Muslim groups. This was explored by Hriar (1997) as he demonstrates such multiplicity by emphasizing the seventy three sects¹, the influences that each group have, the power struggle in Arabic and Islamic countries and the power to implement Islamic rule and programme (Hriar, 1997 p. 11). Muslims around the world have been divided due to loyalty to one or other sect.

The daily life of these women shows many aspects that might shed light on how they perform in relation to their traditions, religion, and customs and how their lives are affected by dominant discourses in West Yorkshire. A case in point is the constant experience of social

¹ Apart from the sects Islam has four major doctrines as well. These doctrines resemble the division of the Christian faith, ie orthodox catholic, protestant etc.

harassment faced by many of the Sudanese women, particularly teenage girls, as few of them wear Hijab/veil. They have been subjected to a catalogue of abuse and persistently interrogated for not wearing the veil as they have been mistaken for Pakistani or Asian women. The statement of many of the women reflects the hegemonic nature of mainstream Islam in the UK. This situation led many of their teenage daughters to refuse categorically to enter any local shops in neighbourhoods dominated by Asian Muslims, fearing intimidation and harassment. This is a case that shows the conflicting edge between two Muslim groups in West Yorkshire. The case reflects as well the persistent divide not across religion only but rather across ethnicity among all Muslim groups.

Alternative religious and racial identity in the UK: Popular Islam versus political Islam

It is vital to present yet another alternative Islam that might in fact challenge the British mainstream Islam. This paper is in fact a call for alternative religious Muslims and alternative identities of Muslims around Europe. In general in the UK, African Islam is largely ignored. One can cite as one of many reasons for this, being the smaller numbers of Muslims from Africa who actually live in the UK compared to the majority of Muslims² living in the country. The representation of Islam and Muslims in the UK is usually presented by Muslims who are part of the mosques in the UK. The mosques in question are predominantly Asian mosques, and that reflects the representation of Muslims in the constructed groups of council of Muslims and other Islamic groups. Most of these mosques are off limits for Sudanese Muslims as well as for other African Muslims. The presence of an African ethnicity within the Asian mosques is categorically rejected and resented by Asian Muslims. The interplay of racism and sexism is directly connected to it. Paying homage to the multifaceted nature of Islam and exploring Sudanese Islam is essential to establish the dis/connectedness of Sudanese Islam and the Islam in the diaspora space.

Sudan's majority are Sunni Muslims (It is worth mentioning here that Pakistanis are also Sunni Muslims). Islam in Sudan is in fact a combination of Islam and various indigenous beliefs. The Sunni Muslims of Sudan are predominantly Sufi Muslims. Sufi Islam differs in its implications and the way it is practiced socially and culturally. However, the Islam in Sudan reflects two main streams: the popular Islam, which is the Sufi Islam and the political Islam which is the fundamental and

² Estimates of the Muslim population in England are between 1.5 million. Eighty percent who are from Pakistan, Bangladesh and India, other groups are mainly Arabs, Turkish, Somalis. (Tensin Benn & Haifaa Jawad 2003 :xxii)

ideological Islam. What makes the study of any Muslim groups limited when it relates to Sudanese Muslim women is the different nature of Islam and its patriarchy as stressed and presented by Kandiyoti (1991).

Kandiyoti highlights two differing examples of Sub-Saharan Africa and the Asian Middle Eastern. She describes it as a continuum ranging from less corporate forms of house holding involving the relative autonomy of mother and child units in Sub-Saharan Africa to the more corporate male-headed entities prevalent in the Middle East and Asian regions. The importance of Kandiyoti's articulation comes from the fact that she accurately instigates a division and a clear cut distinction between two different models that exhibit patriarchy. This great variation in women's positions under the two systems sheds light on the limitation of the studies and generalisation of Islam in Western countries. It presents a similar position of Sudanese women in relation to their religious identity and as well a manifestation of the limitation of the studies on Asian and Middle Eastern women carried out in the West. All fall short in accommodating the huge differences and variation in women's history in relation to Islam, politics and culture. These variations in the African system are grounded in complete cultural and historical processes. The examples of women's open resistance stand in contradiction to women's accommodation to the system, which Kandiyoti called classic patriarchy.

Kandiyoti examines the positions of women in these areas, and its relation to family and class. Unlike women in sub-Saharan Africa who attempt to resist unfavourable labour relations in the household, women in areas of classic patriarchy of South/East Asia often adhere as far and as long as they possibly can. Hence the fluctuation of women's power position results in their active reproduction of their own subordination.

An example of traditional Sufi group *tariqqa* is presented by Hutson (2001). The Tiganiyya of Kano in Nigeria is a Sufi Muslim group similar to many other groups existing in Sudan. Hutson (2001) describes the rules of script that operate in the Sub-Saharan Africa system. Analysing the patriarchal bargaining between men and women in the order, Hutson reveals how the actions of the women with positions of spiritual authority were both independent and shaped by the order's patriarchy (Hutson, 2001 p.734). Hence that the variations in the Sudanese case are grounded in complete cultural and historical process is self evident.

Exploring another dimension related to the study of Sudanese women is their ethnic identity. It is true that the presence of black communities in the UK has added a new dimension to issues of cultural identity and politics.

However as suggested by Brah (1996), these concepts need further exploration, as the term black itself does not

in fact reflect a homogenous category for black people living in the UK. Black/African/Asian people in Britain do not share the same culture, neither are they united in terms of their colour, race religion or other factors. Brah (1996) states that " political history of Britain during the 1970s and 1980s cannot be understood without addressing the significance of Black, as one of the most enabling, highly contested and contesting, new left political subjects of the period" (Brah, 1996 p. 14).

How have Sudanese women in particular been constructed in the UK in different discourses, policies and practices? How are such constructions contested by these women? Culture must be understood within the context of power relations among different groups, and that is why it is important to understand the history of colonialism and the country of origin's social and political history and the positions of women within it. Hall defined the concept of identity as a process that is never complete, and Brah (1996) stresses further that identity is an enigma, which by its very nature defies a precise definition (Brah, 1996 p. 16). Hence this is an articulation of a process which is difficult to define in accurate terms. However in an attempt to explore and to reveal the very specific history of Sudanese women, a brief historical account on their experiences and culture will follow.

Migration, gender, identity and Sudanese women

When exploring the current literature on migration and whether it does or does not apply to the Sudanese women, it is significant to view the Sudanese women in West Yorkshire as a group of Muslim women who migrated to the UK. There has been an increasing recognition of the importance of the role of female migration. The main trend within feminist theory has been an increase in preoccupation with questions of identity and the body. Debates tend to shift towards an acknowledgement of the complex interactions between categories of sex, class, 'race' and gender e.g minority studies in the US (Kofman et al., 2000).

In reviewing the literature on migration it is clear that there is an absence of gender relation analysis, and this undermines specific analysis of female migration. It is widely expressed within the European countries, that gender relations and sexuality are crucial in defining cultural boundaries and binary opposition between Modern/West and the traditional models/developing world. Religion has become the key signifier of incompatible differences, as always has been the case with Islam and Muslims. As Kofman et al. (2000) states:

Islamic groups regulated by patriarchal structure are singled out as being too distinctive in their lives and

social norms to be able to cohabit with groups whose practices are derived from Christian traditions.

Such a dichotomy is reproduced in many European countries particularly after 9/11 and the July bombing in Britain. Following these events, a stigma was reproduced and attached to Muslims and Islam round the globe which defined Muslim/Islam as the other.

Migration in general takes different forms, as labour migration, family reunification and formation, or migration of refugees and asylum seekers. Women enter the migration space through all these categories. However each of these categories says little about the reciprocal influences of these women in the new space, and what they endure in and out the migration space.

Sudanese women in West Yorkshire could as well be part of a category of broadly un-researched migrants, whether they are failed asylum seekers or they came as a part of family reunification, or as migrants from another European country. The fact that these women share an aspect of identity with other groups thoroughly studied, like Muslim women, or African women or even Middle Eastern women, exclude very important and peculiar aspects of their identity and erroneously situates them as part of a broad category of women judged on the basis of religion or geography only.

How the new space articulated the identity of its Muslim immigrants is explained by Barbara (1996) as she stresses that "beyond the local organizations the British are particularly notable for their expectation that every religious community will evolve a single hierarchy and leadership. If there is an archbishop of Canterbury, there has to be a chief Rabbi; one university centre of the study of Christian Muslim relations pairs the director general of the London Islamic centre with the archbishop as patrons, nothing more astonishes continental European visitors to Britain than the official encouragement given to Muslim organization" (Barbara, 1996 p. 13).

This position articulated by Barbara (1996) resembles the fact encountered by Sudanese women in Leeds in their attempt to formulate a women's group. They failed in their attempts since 2006 to register the group and to generate any possible government funding and support, while their attempt to request support for a Quranic reading group was welcomed and supported within only one week of its formulation.

How gender influences migration was articulated by Mahler (Mahler, 2003 p. 812) as she stresses:

Gender influences migration lives, however gender has been regularly sidelined in scholarly research on international migration over the past 100 years, and the same pattern holds for the migration studies. This is an attempt to bringing gender into this promising body of

research.

The framework can work as a useful method to conduct the study of Sudanese women. In the framework the social location is said to conceptualize gender as a process, to deconstruct the myth, and to help demarcate between female and male in activities, task division, space time, dress etc. These distinctions are not natural; they are a human construct. Social location is defined by Silvey (2004 p. 822) as:

Referring to how people are positioned within power hierarchies created through historical political and economic geography and kinship-based and other social stratification factors.

Hence tackling gender as a structure, and uncovering reasons behind women being invisible should be challenged. By the same token, women from Sudan who live in West Yorkshire need to be studied as yet another diverse category of Muslims. Their invisibility reflects the lacking of comprehensive study on Muslim women in the UK that can single out their peculiar identity, culture and social life.

How Sudanese women are positioned within the power hierarchy of their new space, and how they are positioned historically are determinant factors in the study of these women's identity. It helps as well in the study of other minority Muslim groups in Europe. Moreover, if it were claimed that women in fact migrate across international boundaries at almost the same rate as men, then why not study prevailing gender relation and investigate its consequences? (Delaet, 1999 p. 13).

Migrating to Europe reflects various tendencies and patterns, dominant among different communities and groups. One example shows that there is always a tendency among women to stay and men to leave. In the case of migrant communities in the Netherlands, males/head of the households forced their wives and children to return to their country of origin; a situation that necessitated the interference of the Dutch authorities and led to the introduction of measures to ensure that female members of the family were not forced to leave. This is basically influenced by the change in social status that affects women deeply, the improvement in women's position compared to men which creates a better environment for women in relation to men.

Diverse cases of migrations were presented by Pessar (2003), Silvey (2004), Hondagneu (1999); some about the migrants' negotiating space, and how gender relations affect them; other cases show how the transnational obligations can limit men's ultimate return.

Other examples show that hierarchies are built equally on class, ethnicity, nationality, and sexuality levels as well

as on religious level. People are born into social locations that confer certain advantages and disadvantages. In this case the example of a child born in Britain and one in Somalia, can present how gender works on different levels that affect the group's or individual's social location.

People's social locations usually do shift over time and this suggests a non-fixed location is basically affected by power hierarchy namely ethnicity, class, 'race' and sexuality. The social location of Sudanese Muslim women has its multi-faceted dimension. As whether they are located within the broad and mainstream Muslims of Asian descent, or as part of a large community of African descent or in a third instance as part of a broad category of Middle Eastern or Arabic speaking communities. Within the social location and the power hierarchy mentioned, Sudanese women assume a conflicting position as ethnically African, religiously Muslims, and as part of a broad social class within the British society.

Sudanese women's experiences should be analysed on a multiple level. Using the gendered geographies of power helps in mapping and identifying the pluralistic positions of these women. As people's social locations do shift over time, as suggested by the framework presented, so people are situated within the power hierarchies that they have not constructed. This could be validated when tackling the issue of Sudanese women's identity, as African, Arabized and Islamic/Muslim group and most importantly ethnically diverse. It is worth mentioning that within the power hierarchies, the political, economic, historical, geographic and kinship factors are equally important and it shows how the hierarchies are built on class, 'race', ethnicity and sexuality. Among these women themselves and in their new space, the well-known issue of Darfur³ can present a good case reflects the interplay of identity, ethnicity, politics, class and economic conflict.

The issue of power and hegemonic gender regime is an essential issue. The available research reveals that the state assumes a key role both in the gendered lives of immigrant refugee women and men. The state also affects the production of cultural genres that emulate or challenge such immigrants' everyday lives (Silvey, 2004; Pessar and Mahler, 2003; Goldring, 2001; Hondagneu-Stelo, 1999).

The way in which female migrants are ignored in some fields might lead us to justify the lack of comprehensive studies of different Muslim groups; a trend to homogenise

³ Darfur crisis erupted when the Islamic regime in Khartoum used the Janjawid to lead the proxy war against Darfurians who are Muslims and portrayed as African. The discourse of Arabism and Islamism embedded in the politics of the Islamist victimized Darfurian, and led to the current war in the region, apart from the long discourse of marginalisation and exclusion of the western region of the country by the governing elites through the Sudanese history since independent in 1965.

Muslims is harmful, and it undermines their importance due to their smaller numbers. It also assumes that their role is passive and that they are insignificant. Such positions need to be challenged. Studying Sudanese women in West Yorkshire is an attempt to challenge efforts that homogenise Muslims and Islam.

Hondagneu stresses why female migrants were ignored:

The field had ignored female migrants owing to the widely shared assumption that women and children migrate to accompany or to reunite with their breadwinner migrant husband (Hondagneu-Stelo 1999 p. 29).

However, gender analysis should be extended in order to be able to analyse how social life is organized in the new space.

Hondagneu stresses further the importance of employing multiple research methods to produce new materials such as qualitative and quantitative methods used in the case tackled by Douglas Massey in 1987.⁴ The limitation of these studies lies in the fact that it falls short in examining Muslim women from Africa, who are culturally and distinctly different. It falls short as well in identifying the importance of females in migration within all its categories and particularly when aspects of class, ethnicity and 'race' play a crucial role in undermining other groups.

Negotiating gender and migration in the new space:

Migration is not a process best understood in economic and political terms; it is also socio cultural processes mediated by gendered and kinship ideologies institutions and practices (Passer and Mahler 2006 p. 34).

Migration as a socio-economic and cultural process has affected men and women differently. Lewis (1982 p. 1), Massey (1993 p. 431), Kucukcan (1999 p. 21) attributed the phenomena of migration and people's movement to social economic and political factors.

Such processes need to be truly considered when conducting this study. An important part of these processes is interrogating the legal margins in the host country and its ability to impose its force and influence old gender relations, in terms of affecting aspects of decision making, economic independence, child care, etc.

It is important to stress the fact that the changes in females' status as a result of migration do affect men's positions and interrelate with other challenges for both men and women, as the cross cutting edges, of racism, classism, religion and legal status. Examining women's

⁴ In this study, multiple methods were employed throughout its duration.

attitudes towards social, economic and political transformation in their new space and the complex process of migration shows that there is room to reproduce patriarchy in the new space; in many studies on migration it was suggested that patriarchy was reintroduced and reconstructed in many European Countries (Pessar, 2006; Mahler, 2006; Silvey, 2004).

Migration laws in Europe and its impact on migrant women, and how it influences gender relations among them, are well articulated by Bhabha (1996) and Crawley (1997 p. 40), as they stress that;

In many European countries immigration laws act to reproduce traditional notions of women's dependency on men by assuming that the latter are breadwinners and thus the heads of household; this is a persistent gender practice, long entrenched gendered notions of the male public sphere and the female private sphere also serve to impede states and international organizations from defending women's human rights against assaults experienced routinely in the more intimate spaces of families and ethnic communities (Bhabha, 1996; Crawley, 1997: 40).

Another previous articulation that undermines and sidelines gender relations is the one presented by Ravenstein as he suggests that females migrate more frequently than males within their country of birth, but are less likely to move further. This is a point disputed by Hoerder (2006) on the grounds that it suggests that women are primarily short distance migration compared to longer range migration for men, something which was not proven (Sinke, 2006: 83). Emphasising the importance of gender, historian Dirk Hoerder (2006) states that:

Not only are migration systems characterized as predominantly male or female, but it shows how the interplay of individual circumstances familial relationships, larger economic cycles and existing circuits of knowledge and transportation are gendered and how that interplay encourages or discourages certain types of migration at particular points in time, in particular places and even at times for particular individuals" (Hoerder, 2006 p. 28).

How can one benefit from such articulation of gender and gender relations in the Diaspora space, and how does it affect the study of Sudanese women? These examples help to clarify matters relating to this study, as it creates a platform to negotiate different patterns in dealing with Muslim women already existing in the UK. These women's experiences highlighted the interplay of the state policy, political and popular discourse and a variety of other institutional practices in the construction of the Sudanese identity. Islam with its popular feature in Sudan is a product of an interrelation and interplay of a

combination of Islamic and indigenous beliefs, and it is reflected in these women's identity and their performance of their religion.

Sudanese women past and post colonial era

AL Hag Hamad (1987) gave a thorough historical account on women in Sudan. He mentioned that the matrilineal system of succession was instrumental in the transfer of political power from the Christian Nubian royal families to the encroaching Muslim Arabs. He also explored the history of Sudanese medieval queens ruling over large tracts of territory. Al Hag Hamad gave a complete account of these queens and their eras⁵ (Hamad,⁶ 1987 p.8) Hamad articulated as well the high status royal women in Sudan history, starting from the queen Mother Nasala. The first Cushite to claim the title RE-ancient Egyptian title, Nasala lived in Meroe Northern Sudan. The Funj sultanate of Darfur shows the importance of the role of royal women, as land lords, queen mother called Abo. In the Islamic kingdom of Takali in Southern Kordofan, queen mother played per-eminent role in deciding the succession; a full account of queen mother in Sudan history is given by Shuqayer (1903) and Nachtigal (1971).

The history of the Christian kingdoms of Sudan, and the ruling queens is relatively recent and still manifested in the current position of Sudanese women around the country; to mention just a few, queen Mendi of Western Sudan, Elkandaka, Sitana etc. In short, Islam in Sudan is basically interacting with the dominant culture and shaped with elements of old indigenous beliefs in the way it is practiced and performed.

It was suggested that the Sufi influence of personal and emotional faith has made the Islamic movement in Sudan more open, pragmatic, and moderate in its handling of religious and political issues, relative to other Muslim Brotherhood movements in the region. Its members had modern education and an appreciation for, and a commitment to, economic and social development (Mohamed, 2000).

Sudanese women's position was widely affected by colonial policies as well as by Arabic Islamic discourse, which was adopted by the post colonial state of Sudan, mainly the Islamic regime of 1989, known as the NIF (National Islamic Front). Its rules and regulations have had a profound effect on Sudanese women.

In the recent history of colonialism, and prior to Sudan's independence in 1956, an attempt to expand female

⁵ See Susan Kenyon on Sudanese women for further details.

⁶ Hamad explored the high status of royal women in Sudan history, starting from the queen Mother Nasalsa, the first Cushite to claim the title RE-ancient Egyptian title- . Nasalsa lived in Meroe, northern Sudan

education was rejected by the government/the British authorities. Later the decision was reconsidered and only two classes were added to the Sudanese elementary school//*Kutab* for boys. Later Babiker Badri was granted permission to open an independent girl's school at his own expense in the Blue Nile Province Rufaa'a (Janice, 2007 p. 1880).

The post colonial era of Sudan manifests a drastic change in women's positions and their struggle for emancipation and equal rights. Hale describes the Sudanese women's movement as emanating from secularists and Islamists coexisting in contemporary northern Sudan and contesting its social terrain. Their platforms are similar in the sense of positioning women at the centre of an authentic culture and claiming the elevation of women as a goal; part of the similarity derives from the fact that both of these politics of authenticity are class interested (Hale, 1997 p. 104).

The history of resistance to subordination since the 1940s led by Sudanese women has focussed largely on how religion has been manipulated to ensure male domination followed by the advocacy of economic emancipation for women and revision of family laws. The women's movement in Sudan has been a very strong one since its early establishment in 1946⁷, as it has been equally active in rural and urban areas. The movement has acquired a wider support base. Women's concerns have widened from personal laws to issues of economic empowerment, domestic violence and their public roles. The women's movement achieved some success in influencing state policy, such as gaining political rights, equal pay for equal work and calling for changes in family laws to provide more support for women. At the same time Sudanese women were given the right to work as judges and to assume high positions in the high court, a gain that was eventually reversed by the Islamic junta of 1989. In 1952, the first women's union was established by women graduates and teachers. In 1956 the movement called for social and economic development, women's education in the rural areas, change of the family laws in Sudan, fighting against illiteracy, in addition to the slogan of national awakening and struggle against the British colonisers. In 1965, Sudanese women gained their political rights, and the first Sudanese woman was elected to parliament⁸ (Babiker, 2002 p. 261). In 1989, an Islamic military coup took over in Sudan, dismantling democracy and democratic institutions and confining women to Sharia laws. The years 1990 to 2000 witnessed many events and changes in global politics as well. In Britain the July bombing and the 9/11 incidents

laid a shadow upon the very situation of Muslims around the globe, particularly those living in Europe and the US. One prominent characteristic of Sudanese women living in the UK is that they are few in numbers compared to other immigrants.

Referring to other aspects of these women's identity; being black is important. Black and African is a very specific aspect of blackness. In many instances Brah referred to Asian women as black women within the general context of black minorities in relation to the white British. However the description is problematic as far as Sudanese women are concerned. Their engagement within the social, political and racial politics of the UK placed them in a different category, unable to identify in terms of religion with the majority Muslim communities (Asian) and placed in a position of a double jeopardy facing exclusion from the social politics of the country. Here the question of difference is not a limited one and black is not only about colour; it is a political and cultural position and it explores who is different from who and at what time and where. Articulating the concept of difference and racial construction of the society in the UK, Brah (1996p. 185) stresses that,

The discourse might be primarily about gender but simply will not exist in isolation from other binaries, as class race and religion, even these binaries are problematic as which race, and also which religion?

The binary of religion is intrinsically differentiated and unstable, equally so is the race binary; black is not a coherent and stable construction, a gap of difference exists within black African/ black Asian in terms of history, politics and power.

Visualizing an alternative Muslim woman

The general position of Islam in relation to democracy is well articulated by Saad (Saad, 1997:14) who wrote about the troubled triangle of populism Islam and civil society in the Arab world. Ahmad stresses that Islam is posited as essentially opposed to democracy and pluralism and any scheme for human rights. Mohammed (2005), on the other hand, looks at the areas of the home, the education system and the labour market in the case of young working class British Pakistani Muslim women. She examined the marginal position of Asian Muslim women and attributes their position to the context under which the global decline of secularism and reassertion of right wing religious and Islamist ideologies enabled the assertion of marginality. Mohammed (2005) highlights more how the Pakistani community in Britain retains and continuously renews links with a simultaneous real and imaginary homeland through economic interests

⁷ See British National record, released on 2003, on Sudanese women 1945.

⁸ Fatima Ahmed Ibrahim was the first woman elected to parliament. She was the leader of the women's association and a member of the central committee of the Communist Party of Sudan.

as well as social and kinship networks strengthened by marriage. She stresses that "thus the ideal of womanhood promoted by right wing forces in post-Zia Pakistan travelled through these networks to influence albeit unevenly working class Pakistani communities in Britain (Mohammed, 2005 p. 179).

Hence it is about the right wing forces and Islamic conservatives who shape the existing mainstream Muslims in Britain, and that makes it even more important to examine another Muslim community that might not share the same ideology with the dominant Muslim group. This might be the reason why the UK resembles Sudan after the 1989 Islamic regime, in terms of what Sudanese women as Muslims encountered in West Yorkshire. To demonstrate Sudanese women's position after the 1989 Islamic regime, a description of the situation was well articulated by the *WLUML* (Women Living Under Muslim Laws) in the following words:

"The different face of Islamisation is visible in Sudan where it is being promoted by an authoritarian regime with much more brutal effects, women's job and promotions opportunities in the government have been severely restricted, their mobility made dependent on male and state approval at various levels, their rights to land ownerships curtailed and even their dress regulated, girls and women enrolled in educational institutions are formally subject to a dress code and many expelled in the event of violation of this code, further various state-instituted bodies have been established to patrol streets to ensure appropriate behaviour" [WLUML 1994 Dossier 18 October]

The current Islamic regime of Sudan enforced legislations and procedures on Islamic *principles*. The present legal practice and fundamentalist Islamic discourse violate previously guaranteed constitutional rights to equality in law of women and non-Muslims in Sudan. Historically, gender oppression has been practised against Sudanese women as part of the general social economic and political structure, patriarchal hierarchy and biases have mediated women's cultural identity. During independence, and particularly after 1960 women obtained a significant number of political and civil rights.

They obtained rights such as equality before laws, in job opportunities, the right to vote, the right to equal pay, the right to maternity leave, ownership rights and the right to hold public office (Babiker, 2002).

Rigid constructions of women's bodies occurred in countries like Sudan, Iran, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia and imposed gender division took place. (Mohammad, 2005:183). The veil has always been constructed as the Islamic dress; however, it was imposed rigidly on Sudanese women in 1989 by the Islamic regime. However, among Sudanese women who do wear the veil,

their attitudes towards their teenage daughters is more liberal as they are rarely seen in veil if at all.

Mohammed (2005) examines the rise of conservative radical religious nationalism, which travels from the homeland to the new space in Britain. To her that explains the stress placed on women's roles, and the imposed division and exclusion and spatial constraints on them. This might explain the conservatism that tends to sway towards fundamentalism which characterizes the Pakistani Muslim community when compared to the Sudanese community. The behavioural requirements incumbent on a Muslim woman in Britain is not the same as in Pakistan. The norms and practices of the new space (Mohammed, 2005 p. 196) were taken into account in Ghazi (2005). The conservatism among Sudanese women took the same turn, and is directly influenced by the new space's dominant norms as those who travel from Sudan in their vast majority opposed the current Islamic regime.

It is crucial to stress that in order to position the African Muslim groups among the mainstream Muslims in the UK, it is important to explore their differences culturally, historically and socially in practicing Islam. How African Muslim women, practice and perform their religion is viewed by Abdi Ismail Samatar in relation to Somali women. Somali women constructed the first women's mosque in Somalia and possibly the first female mosque in the world in 1970.

The women completed the mosque in 1972 and a female sheikh led the prayers in this mosque. The case shows and proves the open ended nature of Islamic reinventions and its different features from Islam in South Asia.

This is stressed by many scholars when articulating the issue of women and Islam. It shows as well the interpretation of the hegemony of the languages, the diversity of its sources, and the political systems (Kandiyoti, 1991; Badran, 1991; Karam, 1998; Kazi, 1997; Lesch, 1998). A high trend among Muslim women in Africa to challenge the male interpretation of Islam was as well presented (Anaaem, 1991; Abdi Ismail, 2005). Sudanese republican women represent yet another case, as they are allowed to lead and to call for prayers in the same way as men.⁹ The Sudanese minority in the UK are a product of the immigrants who left the country. Most of the immigration is as recent as the 1980s, which witnessed higher rates of influx particularly after the year 1989 when the Islamic military regime took over. They carried their personal lives and self images with them, and in an attempt to adjust to a different society, unfamiliar with its rules regulation and culture, they were subjected to pressure relating to the considerable change

⁹ Republican party is a religious group, led by Astadh Mahmoud M Taha, who was executed by Islamisation in Sudan in 1983 see Alfikra.org

in life style. The characteristics of a Muslim Muslimness of, African Muslims in general and Sudanese Muslims in particular, vary considerably from that of the Asian Muslims.

Reproduction of patriarchy in the new space

Sudanese women's daily encounters

While the growing scholarly literature addressed the issue of exile Diaspora and the new space, Hall (1990), Brah (1996), Gilroy (1993) articulated the issue of African Muslims in the UK. It was suggested that the post-colonial theory is the key to understanding the diapaonic community formations; the African Muslim women in the UK are not widely known or thoroughly studied, as opposed to the South Asian Muslim women. Both groups incorporate conflicting nature in their practices.

One aspect that manifests a reproduction of patriarchy in the new space is the Muslim women's prayers in the Mosques. Within the Asian Muslim community, the Mosque is a male space and off limits for women, while Sudanese women usually pray in mosques with an allocated space for them. These are two groups where factors as class, social origin, and ethnicity play crucial role in identifying the difference in performance of a Muslim Muslim-ness among them.

Rethinking the text

The interplay of the elements of class, ethnicity and 'race' is important, as articulated by Hussain (2004) as he refers to the reasons behind the failure in the black Community experience in the UK. Hussain stresses:

African Muslim women generally within the Islamic imaginary were portrayed as licentious sexually and cheap morally, and this view originated from early days of slavery, however reading the Islamic text such views were expressed as well in different interpretations worldwide. It is important to stress that the gender is constructed differently for black African women and for black Asian women. The omission of the issue of race and class resulted in more complexity and difficulty in constructing one unit of resistance for racism sexist and exclusion (Hussain 2004 :51)¹⁰

Views of racism, sexism are widely and openly expressed

¹⁰ Organization of women of Asian and African decent (OWAAD) from 1987 till 1983 Husain stresses that the black women movement failed to grow because of internal contradictions, unity on conservative and reactionary ideas do not last long as perceived

in the Islamic religious Quranic texts. The distinctive identity of African Muslims in Britain and the interplay of racism and sexism participated in undermining their experiences. This is an attempt to explore this identity and in a way to embrace the collective identity of African Muslim women in Britain whose voices were not heard and their identity not explored and studied in scholarly work. The impact of their migration and their peculiar experiences is significant; studying Sudanese women in West Yorkshire would establish yet another platform for Black Muslim women.

When singling out the Muslim identity of this group of women, it is important to stress that it is not because they label themselves and focus by necessity on their Islamic cultural expression in place of other loyalties. However, it is an attempt to distinguish the very Islamic identity that does not go in conformity with the main stream Islamic identity of women in the UK. The fact of the lack of studies and works about these women was deemed insignificant due to their small numbers.

Barbara suggests that Muslims negotiate relationships with other Muslim communities in ways that forge communities of larger or smaller scale, among those who share loyalty to sacred texts and symbols. This however is proven to be wrong in relation to Pakistani Muslim communities, as they do share the same sacred texts, symbols and belief with the Muslim community of African origin; they both tend to contradict and conflict with each other in the way they read, interpret and perform the texts.

One aspect of the performance of a Muslim Muslim-ness among Sudanese women is their celebration of Christmas. In a public hall accompanied by their families, Sudanese women faced with a British Muslim official resentment to their act of celebrating Christmas as Muslims. More conflicting positions could emerge as the nature of a Muslim Muslim-ness does contradict the norm of the mainstream Islam in the UK.

Kucukcan (1999) challenged the Islam in Britain as equated with Asian Muslims in the public image, and explores the Turkish Muslims. Kucukcan, (1999 p. 191) stresses that:

The equation between a Turk and being a Muslim has been a landmark of the Turkish identity, Islamic values are deeply rooted in Turkish society, and despite the striking change the Turkish society has faced, Islamic imprint on the fabric of society still remains alive.

Kucukcan (1999) stresses, it seems that Islam in Britain is usually equated with Asian Muslims in the public imagine, which indicates that the Turks as a micro-community within the Islamic *umma* are not included in the studies of Muslims in Britain (Kucukcan, 1999).

Likewise, the Sudanese Muslim women are not

documented, for many reasons such as their small numbers, their ethnic origins, their relatively recent migration, as well as the fact that they have not been perceived as influential. All these factors contributed to their unnoticed presence, a position that this study will challenge. Challenging the undermined position of the African Muslim can be best articulated when studying Muslim Sudanese women.

The establishment of Mosques is yet another example as it has always been a priority for many Muslim groups including Arabic and Asians; however for Sudanese Muslim groups in Britain, the establishment of a community group and an Arabic language schools is an issue of utmost importance. Sudanese communities around the UK usually hold their events religious or otherwise in churches in Leeds, London, and Oxford, contrasting with other Muslim groups.

Due to such conflicting ways and attitudes in performing Islam, studying Sudanese women is highly significant in placing them in the map of Muslim communities in Britain, and exploring their identities (Rosmary Sales, Eleonore Kofman, Annie Phizachlea, Parvati Raghuram), (Eleonore Ed 42.)

Conclusion

It is fundamental and useful to utilize the frame work presented by Passer and Mahler, when studying Sudanese women in West Yorkshire, and to benefit from the articulation of Islam and Muslim identity presented by Moghissi (2005) and Warburg (1985).

Exploring Sudanese women's lives in their host country and questioning the transformations and changes of gender role and gender relations, is an examination of yet a multi-faceted aspect of a particular Muslim identity which is never researched. The main limitation with the current literature on Islam and Muslim women when applied to the study of Sudanese women¹¹ is the fact that when exploring the example of Islam in Sudan and in other Islamic countries, there are very considerable variations in Islam within the context of the country. It is indeed a different social location, a different geography of power and different cultural, political, and social rules we are interrogating.

Public representations of Muslims in the UK and around Europe largely ignore African Islam and Muslims. A possible reason for this neglect is the fact that the African Muslims constitute a minority when compared to Muslims of other ethnic background, and also because they are perceived as un-influential.

Muslim Sudanese women in the UK are one of the

¹¹ The study refers to the Northern Sudanese women. (Political north) of the country with its majority Muslim and Arabic speaking.

under-researched ethnic communities, and a proper understanding of Muslim communities in the UK, depends largely on analyzing Islam as a multi-faceted religion. It is obvious that Sudanese Muslims are not included in any study of Muslims in the UK. Political, social and religious development in Sudan was marked by the hegemony of the Arabic/Islamic discourse, supported by the emerging religious-oriented fundamentalists in Sudan. Muslim communities in the UK reproduce their distinct values, customs, social and cultural structures, and as they constitute a considerable number in general, their presence and expression of identity is predominantly Asian. Sudanese Muslims as a minority Muslim community are undermined and have not been included as part of diversified Muslim community. The interplay of 'race', ethnicity and culture is a factor in formulating this situation. An undermined position within the Islamic imaginary texts of African Muslim is reproduced within the mainstream Muslims in the UK. An articulation and the study of Sudanese Muslim women would fill a vacuum in research on African Muslim groups in the UK, and would stimulate others to tackle Muslim minorities around Europe.

Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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