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Ahmad, Waqar I. U. and Evergeti, Venetia (2010) The making and representation of Muslim identity in Britain: conversations with British Muslim elites. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 33 (10). pp. 1697-1717. ISSN 0141-9870

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**The making and representation of Muslim identity in Britain:  
conversations with British Muslim ‘elites’**

*Ethnic and Racial Studies (in press)*

**Waqar I. U. Ahmad and Venetia Evergeti**

**Abstract**

The common nomenclature of ethnicity, race and colour has been found wanting in theorising and dealing with the Muslim presence in Britain. This study of 24 prominent British Muslims - including political, policy and academic/intellectual ‘elite’ – explores the making and representation of Muslim identity in Britain. We explore this through three considerations: Muslimness as a ‘master status’; leadership and representation in relation to British Muslims; and the public performance of Muslimness during ‘key moments’.

**Key words:** cultural racism; Islamophobia; elite; Muslims; politics of identity; racialization

**Introduction**

Notions of race, colour and ethnicity have dominated both theoretical and policy considerations in relation to population diversity in the United Kingdom. Recently, however, the focus of debate has shifted from the politics of colour and race to ethnicity and religion (Peach 2005). Modood and Ahmad have noted that because of the ‘political crises featuring Muslims rather than Asians or non-whites per se –from the Rushdie Affair in 1988-89 to the first Gulf war in 1991, the controversies around Muslim faith schools, 11 September 2001, the resulting wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the 7 July 2005

bombings – the term ‘Asian’ has ceased to have much content as a political category’ (Modood and Ahmad 2007, p. 187). ‘Muslim’ has instead gained considerable prominence as a category of identification in recent debates on diversity and its management.

This shift has also been highlighted in ‘official’ state categories of identification for ethnic and migrant minorities. The 2001 Census included a voluntary question on religion. Future Censuses are likely to build on this and, additionally, include questions on ‘national identity’ (ONS 2007). This is an important shift in the official discourse on identity and belonging, a move also welcomed by the Muslim Council of Britain (ONS 2007).

One consequence of this shift to ‘Muslim’ as the predominant identity is the racialisation of Muslimness. Communities characterized by differences of denomination, regional background, ethnicity and linguistic heritage, are increasingly presented as a homogenous, undifferentiated mass, now seen akin to an ethnic or racial group, with presumed deterministic values diametrically opposed to, and threatening the values of the civilized West (e.g. Kundani 2007; also Naber 2000, for the USA). In his powerful analysis of anti-Muslim racism, Kundani notes how being a Muslim increasingly acts as a racialised symbol of difference, with Islam being portrayed in public and policy discourses as an ethnicity or race, opposed to ‘whiteness’ or ‘Britishness’. The fundamental role of Muslim civilization in the very birth of modern Europe is conveniently forgotten (Fletcher 1992; Armstrong 2000; Hellyer 2007). Equally, alliances with those of other faiths and no faith, over a range of struggles over resources, policies and recognition, go unacknowledged. In policy and political terms, Islamophobia is often at the heart of the politics of recognition of Muslims in Western European discourses (Eade 1996; Vertovec 2002; Kundani 2007). In the post September 11<sup>th</sup> and July 7<sup>th</sup> context, such debates have become even more prominent. As a result of the ‘war on terror’ Muslims have been propelled to the

forefront of the political agenda and questions have emerged in relation to the fit between British or Western values and Muslim identity (Vertovec 2002). This has serious implications for Muslims and how they espouse or resist various identifications. Meanwhile, attempts continue to be made to theorise these phenomena, often in the wake of challenges posed by political and policy crisis (Asad 1990; Hellyer 2007; Kundani 2007; Parekh 2008).

Given this background, in this paper we will explore the interactional order of Muslim identity formation and its different manifestations during key moments. Using empirical data from our study of prominent Muslims in Britain, we will examine the way our respondents articulate the emergence of Muslimness as a primary identification of Muslims, how Muslimness is represented and how it is lived or performed during key moments (the Rushdie affair, September 11 or the Israeli attack on Gaza).

### **Methods and Analysis**

Our study focuses on qualitative interviews with 24 prominent Muslims. It aimed to gauge their perspectives and experiences in relation to the challenges Muslims face, their own religious and political attitudes, the future of British or European Islam and how their Muslim identity may interplay with their professional lives. It relied on loosely structured conversations, allowing the discussion to be shaped by the respondent around key themes.

Access to ‘elites’ is not easy. In this study, personal knowledge as well as referrals from other respondents and colleagues assisted recruitment. The sampling frame consisted of potential respondents personally known to Ahmad, those identified from Muslim and other websites, names listed in the Muslim Power 100 publication and suggestions from colleagues and friends.

While all the interviews were conducted by Ahmad, in English, several required some knowledge of Arabic, Urdu and Farsi. They also required knowledge of Islam and Muslim communities. Interviews were regarded by respondents as conversations between equals. Challenge and counter challenge was therefore not uncommon. But equally, Ahmad had to avoid the pitfalls which can befall ‘insider’ researchers – especially the assumption that the interviewer and interviewee share each other’s experiences and world views – by questioning assumptions and where appropriate, providing alternative perspectives. The respondents were assured that their anonymity would not be compromised in whatever we publish. We therefore provide only as much information on individuals as is consistent with making a particular point, but without compromising anonymity

Interviews were conducted during October 2008 and February 2009. Most interviews were of 45-90 minutes duration. Of the 24 respondents, 9 were female and 15 male. Twenty three interviews were recorded and transcribed; notes were taken on the remaining one interview. Table 1 provides summary details of respondents.

Table 1 about here

Sociologists have considered the ‘nature of elites as fundamental to understanding the characteristics of their societies’ (Savage and Williams, 2008, p1; see also Scott, 2008), but interest in elite studies has declined in British sociology. Consistent with Scott, we use the term ‘elite’ to refer to respondents in positions of considerable influence because of their education, formal positions, links within civil society, political or representational power, or involvement in professions or government. While some may not have defined themselves as ‘elites’, in their narratives our respondents acknowledged their influential status within and outside their communities. We have categorised our respondents as political, policy and academic/intellectual ‘elite’. The three categories of ‘elite’ hide considerable

internal diversity. For example, three of the six political elite were parliamentarians, two were prospective parliamentary candidates and the remaining one was a senior local politician and a one time Lord Mayor of a significant British city. The policy elite included senior civil servants, local authority chief officers and voluntary sector leaders. Finally, the academic and intellectual elite included seven senior academics, two writers and one artist. Further, these are flexible categories and many respondents could be categorised under more than one of these categories. For these respondents the category used reflects their current predominant role. . To protect anonymity, we refer to respondents as follows – Politic 1-6 identifies the political elite; policy 1-8 refers to the eight policy elite; and academic1-10 relates to the academic and intellectual elite.

Transcriptions were checked against the recorded interviews and corrected, including for Islamic terms. The initial analysis by Evergeti, was developed through dialogue between and further interrogation of data by both authors. Our analytical approach is an interactionist one, looking at the meanings social actors attach to particular social settings and the way they form and negotiate their identities according to their interpretation of given situations. This involves a descriptive and inductive analysis of the experiences, attitudes, relationships, meanings and actions of those under study (Evergeti 2006a). Such an approach reveals the interactional dynamics of group identity and its various manifestations in various social contexts. The analysis involved a number of phases: a close examination of the interview data; identifying important topics in each interview; comparing and contrasting material in all interviews and creating a taxonomy of key themes.

## **Findings and Discussion**

The interviews covered a number of themes. In this paper we will concentrate on the issue of Muslim identity, organising our findings under three key, overlapping areas – the journey towards

‘Muslimness’ as a key identification in Britain; representing ‘Muslimness’; and living ‘Muslimness’ during key moments to demonstrate the still contingent nature of this identity.

***From ‘black to Muslim to terrorist’: the making and negotiation of ‘Muslim’ identity as a master status trait***

Identity construction, ascription, acceptance or resistance are multi-faceted, contingent and contested processes. Often one aspect of personal or group identity becomes more salient through a web of social interactions in various social and historical contexts, thus creating what Hughes has called a ‘master status trait’ (Hughes 1945; see also Bauman 1996). A master status can be externally imposed, resisted or absorbed and negotiated at different historical or biographical points. A master status carries with it ‘auxiliary traits’ that often define stereotypically a particular identity, for example the Islamophobic view that defines ‘Muslims’ in relation to taken-for-granted negative elements such as being ‘intolerant’ ‘anti-Western’, ‘radical’ or ‘extremist’. Several respondents commented on how the journey to Muslim identity in Britain gained cultural and political salience – a two way process in which external pressures and internal desires were equally at work, according to some of our respondents. National and international events – the Rushdie affair, the Gulf Wars, the War in Afghanistan, Western political interference in Muslim countries, responses to what our respondents universally considered as appalling events of September 2001 and July 2005 – were regarded as key to the emergence of a sense of Muslim identity on part of the Muslim community, and the external imposition of ‘Muslim’ as a master identity, over a diverse set of communities.

So how did a ‘Muslim’ identity become the predominant identification of Britain’s ethnically and denominationally diverse Muslim populations? We begin with two narratives. First, a female academic

(Academic 6) with a history of research in the field argues that the change was both internally desired and externally imposed:

Well, there are two challenges in my view. One challenge comes from the society in which they live - the majority society - and that is they insist on identifying them as Muslim. This is a recent development ... that started in the '80's, especially with Islamic activism, reaching Britain with the Rushdie affair. Before that there was no reference to those communities as being Muslim - they were either Asian..., sometimes people also referred to them as blacks or by their nationality such as Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and others. But suddenly from the 1980's the 2 million people were identified by the whole society as Muslim. The second point was that they themselves started seeing themselves and articulating their presence in Britain as Muslims rather than as people whose parents ... have come from - let's say Kashmir or Bangladesh or Gujarat or the Punjab - ...and this shift has actually, in my view, been detrimental to the presence of Muslims in Britain ...

She notes that this coincided with a global trend emphasizing Muslimness as a key identification:

As a result of this particular historical context in which this identity as a Muslim became prominent - not only in Britain but the rest of the world - Saudi Arabia to Egypt, to Iraq, to other places - people have moved away from this national or ethnic belonging to the global identity of being a Muslim and in a way what is happening today in the world with globalisation has given credibility to this because being a Muslim means that you are part of a wider global community, which globalisation encourages through, for example, easy travel, tele-communication, the internet, all these new kind of communication technology that came with ... globalisation, encouraged and reinforced the fact that we are now Muslims whose networks, loyalties cross the borders to other places. If we ask for example your parents or my parents,

they would not have identified themselves with this global community, they would have seen themselves as coming from this little village or that little village or that country. But from the 1980's, especially with the young generation, there is a shift in the way we Muslims present ourselves and the way the others perceive us.

Similar sentiments were articulated by a female political activist and policy professional (Policy 8), who also emphasised the importance of 'Sheikh Google' - by giving ready access to global communication, news, religious knowledge and to internet based communities - in creating and sustaining a global Muslim identity. A leading local politician (Politic 3), however, notes that this identification is the latest in a number of identifications that Muslims of his generation, now retired, have negotiated, more or less willingly:

... I once said to the journalist .... He said 'what do you think about yourself now, where do you stand being a Muslim in your position?' and I said 'I came to this country 40 - 45 years ago. At that time I was described as black and I fought against [oppression], as a black person, politically I described myself as black. Then later on I became an Asian and then 10 - 15 years ago I was a Muslim and now if you ask me honestly, I am a 'terrorist'.' So image has changed over the years, from black, to Asian, to Muslim, to terrorist.

Alongside external ascriptions of Muslim identity, Muslims themselves were active participants in the making of the 'Muslim identity'. This, sometimes 'fictive unity', as described by Werbner (1991), was sustained both by common distress at the hardships experienced by Muslims across the globe, by reference to the notion of a global Ummah, and as noted by Academic 6 above, by globalisation and

technology (see also Klausen 2005, p. 27). A local authority chief officer (Policy 2) noted that Muslims felt under siege and:

... the impact of that is that it is creating Muslim community identity in a sense, because when you are feeling oppressed or you see an aggressor, you stand together and you create an identity, a new identity...

Whether a unified 'Muslim identity' is a positive development or not, depends on who attributes or claims it, how it is performed in the public sphere and the symbolic and ideological boundaries of belonging that it encompasses. All of the respondents' accounts of the complex and sometimes contradictory meaning attached to Muslim identity indicate the way in which an identity is a constantly negotiated, contingent performance, 'an emergent property of an ongoing interpersonal bargaining' (Watson 1981, p. 453). Nor can the move to Muslimness as the primary identity be absolute. Many of our older respondents, active in colour and race oriented struggles of the last three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, found it difficult to sustain a coherent narrative around Muslimness, constantly slipping into the language of race and racism; some nostalgic about the one-time broader alliances across religious and ethnic boundaries, others regarding this as an era of naivety. In some cases, respondents attempted to forcefully assert a 'normative' Muslim unity, later accepting the diversity and sectarian rifts within the Muslim communities. This is illustrated by the following terse response, to Ahmad's contention that the Muslim society suffers from sectarian divides:

Policy 7        There's no sects in Islam. There's schools of thought. [sits up and raises voice to make his point]

Ahmad        There's schools of thought.

Policy 7        There's no sects in Islam. All believe in Allah, the Prophet, the Quran.

Ahmad        That's fine, that's fine.

Policy 7        There's no difference whatsoever.

As we will see, this respondent later laments the internal divides within the Muslim communities in relation to representational leadership.

While the emergence of Muslimness as a primary identity and its representation formed a key theme in these narratives, how Muslimness was negotiated with other identity claims was not lost on our respondents. Many interviewees talked about the tendency of policy and media debates to wrongly classify them as a monolithic, undifferentiated 'Muslim community' (see Evergeti 2006a; Modood et al 2006).

Most of our participants resisted such a unifying, single categorisation, referring to regional, linguistic and ethnic differences, as well as the plurality of Islam across time and space. There are two important issues emerging from such accounts. One is to emphasise the tolerance of diversity in Islam, thus demonstrating that Islam, historically has been multicultural, encompassing various cultures and ethnicities but also accommodating other faiths. Some respondents, for example, referred to the constitution of Madina at the time of the Prophet as an early example of multiculturalism, built around alliances with Christians and Jews of Madina. The second relates to the way various aspects of Muslim identities are formed and negotiated depending on the socio-historical, political and cultural context – diversity rather than identikit Islam is the hallmark of Muslim history. A writer with an interest in faiths in South Asia (Academic 4), argued that South Asian Muslims should be proud of the thousand year shared history with Hindus. Equally she feared that a homogenised, ahistorical and notionally global Islam may be emerging in pockets with dubious claims of authenticity, propagating an austere, restrictive, Wahabist theology – see also Grewal, 2009. The respondent introduced above (Academic 6) along with several others, spoke of the inherent diversity of Islam:

Islam is a universal religion and ...[its] strength [is] that it was able to incorporate ethnic and cultural difference ... therefore what is happening today in terms of making us all homogenous - making us all pray in the same way, making us all believe in the same and practice our faith in one particular way - is a recent development that is not at the heart of Islam.

She related this diversity to the lack of a formal central authority or clergy in Islam, a point also made by others, although one noted the existence of de facto clergy in the shape of Imams and Ulema (Academic 10):

We have never had a Church, we have never had a Pope, we have never had a kind of higher council of Ulema speaking on our behalf ...and this is why it has managed to succeed and spread in places so different from the cultural, geographical origin of it. ...it is a religion which allows the incorporation of difference ...there are multiple opinions, multiple fatwahs, depending where we are ....

Pluralism in Islam has been well documented in the relevant literature (Fletcher 1992; Armstrong 2000; and for recent considerations Klausen 2005; Modood and Ahmad 2007).

Other identifications were also important to our respondents. For example, a policy respondent (Policy 8) noted that a Muslim woman was leading a national campaign against domestic violence, very much as a woman and not as a Muslim. A novelist and academic (Academic 7) talked about the importance of locality identity, in deciding to send their daughters to the 'lousy' local school, with a large (white) council housing estate intake:

...we... consciously decided to send our kids to this school knowing that it was quite a lousy school, with the belief that, actually, ... it kind of, fucks up the ecology ... if I take her [older daughter] ... to another school, it's almost like wealth extraction, you know, ... brain drain...

Indeed Alam and Husband (2006) have noted the strong sense of locality loyalty among Bradford's young Muslims. Others (Amin 2002; Kundani 2007) have argued that the 2001 street disturbances in Northern cities related to a strong sense of locality identity, with young Muslim men protecting their 'patch' against both racists from outside of their area and the local police.

### ***Representing Muslims: political and representational leadership***

Although respondents welcomed some recent positive developments, most expressed concerns in relation to representation and leadership and argued that important changes needed to take place both within British politics and the Muslim communities to facilitate Muslims' full participation in British society. To illustrate this, we pick two areas – political leadership and representation of Muslims as a collective; however we leave our respondents' personal roles as leaders for a separate discussion. First, several were critical of both the lack of and 'mediocrity' of political leadership given by Muslim leaders. Following on from an interview with a parliamentarian [Politic 2] at the Houses of Parliament, Ahmad was invited to lunch with the respondent and a Jewish academic engaged in interfaith work. Discussion led by the parliamentarian focused on the paucity of Muslims in both the Houses of Parliament (then four MPs and ten members of the Lords). The parliamentarian and the guest contrasted this with an estimated 40 Jewish MPs and more than 80 members of the Lords, from a population about one-eighth the size of the Muslim population. That the Muslims in the two Houses of Parliament were broadly South Asian and exclusively of Pakistani origin in the Lower House was noted by our respondents, and used by one respondent (an aspiring national politician) to entice her ethnic community to engage in party politics, while acknowledging the strong support from some of these MPs (Politic 5). Others were pleased at the increase in numbers but critical of the quality of some of the parliamentarians, 'at least we have our share of mediocrity', said one respondent; although the Muslim ministers (then two) were singled out for praise, few parliamentarians had made memorable

interventions, noted some, while others pointed that some of the appointees to the Upper House lacked the stature commonly expected of Peers.

The increasing Muslim political leadership at the local level was acknowledged by many. However, some respondents were critical of both what had been achieved at the local level and the nature of political engagement; arguing that success, for South Asians and especially Pakistanis, relied more on community and biraderi allegiances than party politics:

... it is the village politics of Pakistan and Azad Kashmir that is being played out. It isn't actually the UK politics that's driving these forces. There is one very good example just very recently in Birmingham where people have switched camps from Labour to Liberal and still got elected. ...you ask any of these candidates 'what does your Labour Party stand for, what's the manifesto of the Liberal Party?' they haven't got a clue because that isn't the manifesto they are standing on actually. This is about biraderism... (Policy 2)

This and some other respondents see biraderi as a retrograde institution, confining political power among biraderi members irrespective of their political aptitude or credentials, a view supported by Klausen (Klausen 2005, p. 24).

The problem of weak and uninspiring leadership, according to some, extended beyond party politics:

And one of the big things around 7/7 is, my goodness, you know, our leadership is terribly weak, who's come forward here, the same usual suspects, parochial, biraderi driven, self appointed leaders in many senses. Who are the younger people, [and even] when the young people start coming through, well, what are they really saying, they're just presenting a new

labour line here? Where's the independence, where is that scrutiny, ... where are those parts of resistance? (Academic 4)

Secondly, respondents regarded the representation of Muslim interests through national Muslim organizations as a key concern. While some improvements were noted – several respondents praised the Muslim Council for Britain as an honest, broadly democratic, though over-ambitious experiment – there was much criticism of several organizations purporting to represent British Muslims. The lack of formal religious hierarchy in Islam, noted as a welcome feature by respondents above, contributes towards the lack of formal leadership among Muslims – Muslims simply do not have, with the exceptions of one or two branches of Islam, institutions such as the Chief Rabbi or the Archbishop of Canterbury. Even if you could create a single, homogenous Muslim voice, legitimated by governmental support and engagement, our respondents would not welcome this. Real and meaningful representation must have inbuilt diversity, fluidity and tension:

... there is no monolithic Muslim community, right, so all different kinds of Muslims must be allowed to speak for themselves, ... who speaks for Muslims ... has been ...[a] contentious issue for a long time, most of the leaders are ... the elder generation, which does not reflect the hopes and aspirations of the younger people or speaks their language, so I think, you know, we need a new younger leadership. (Academic 10)

Thus argues a writer and public intellectual with involvement in establishing the MCB. He goes on to argue that external imposition of leadership must be resisted:

But it's also a question of how the external forces see Muslims and how they represent them and how they allow that representation to, you know, to actually take place. The government ... says that Muslim Council of Britain represent Muslims and they only want to talk to them, ... that is not what I would regard as general representation, that's imposed representation.

Because the following week the government says, actually, the MCB does not represent the Muslims, and they are not going to talk to them and here is a new Sufi Council, they represent the Muslims... I think the Muslims must represent themselves, ... the Government can't tell us who should...

The issue of who represents Muslims, in relation to national organizations in favour with the British government, relates not only to exclusionary politics but also inner community politics and 'authenticity claims' of *how* and by *whom* should the community be represented, as noted by our respondent above. This was also discussed with the policy respondent introduced earlier (Policy 7), who first became involved in Muslim affairs through student politics in the 1970s. He was very critical of efforts so far; the conversation starts with the recently created Mosques and Imams Advisory Board (MINAB), sponsored by the United Kingdom Department of Communities and Local Government, but then goes on to cover the British Muslim Forum (BMF), the Al-Khoi Foundation, the MCB and the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB), the four key institutions for some time in favour with the British government:

Policy 7        It [MINAB] is a useless body.

Ahmad         You think it's a useless body.

Policy 7        It probably will never – it will die before it even starts.

Ahmad         But if people like [---] are involved in it, why is it useless?

Policy 7        Yes, well, because it is at the moment four main organisations– the MCB, Al-Khoi Foundation, the Muslim Association and the British Muslim Forum... The British Muslim Forum is divided into nine groups ... It doesn't have a central authority apart from [...] ... (They have)...created seven people [as] lifelong trustees. According to British law, it's not democratic. ... You go to the website

and you can see 200 mosques, but when you ring the mosques and ask ‘Are you members?’ ‘No’. ‘Have you seen the constitution?’ ‘No’. ‘Have you become a member?’ ‘No.’ So now it is a dead body.

Ahmad Sorry, are you talking about MINAB or the BMF?

Policy 7 British Muslim Forum. MAB and Al-Khoi, Al-Khoi is a think tank of the Shia branch of Imam Al-Khoi from Iraq, which even Iran doesn’t recognise, the Imamia Institution doesn’t recognise, the majority Shias don’t want to know about the Al-Khoi Foundation. There are four or five individuals only and they don’t have command of their own school of thought either because they are articulate in human rights and with the United Nations and have been linked with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office so that’s why they’ve been brought in. The Muslim Association of Britain is an Arab brand of Islam, within the UK, pro Palestinian people and they don’t have the support. All Arabs put together are only 11 % of the total [UK] Muslim population and the majority of people don’t follow them at all because they’re politically motivated... The only credible organisation remains the MCB, but the MCB don’t have resources. ...they have five to six hundred mosques and institutions attached to it – ... but I don’t feel they can deliver because others are trying to undermine the MCB, including their other three organisations ...

While trenchant and partisan, this perspective illustrates the contested nature of Muslim community representation.

Several were critical of a lack of Muslim women in representational roles, including a female prospective parliamentarian (Politic 6), who lamented the lack of support from the Muslim community

and particular difficulty in access to the male space of the local mosque, something she felt would be afforded to male Muslim and both male and female non-Muslim candidates. Respondents blamed patriarchy rather than Islam for this marginalization, one (Policy 7) citing that Prophet Muhammad had appointed a woman, ‘Umme Waraqa as an Imam...’, and that Aysha, the Prophet’s wife, was an acknowledged teacher and leader, even leading in a battle against Ali, the fourth Khalif. However, several of our respondents also talked about Muslim women providing leadership, including in political campaigning and civil action in relation to key events, as we see below.

***‘Forty times a woman before a Muslim before the Gaza conflict, forty times a Muslim than a woman now’: performing Muslimness during ‘key moments’***

Identity plays out in the everyday – the school gate conversation, the work place, what you wear or eat - as well as during ‘key moments’. Several noted that the negative symbolism of being a Muslim has affected the everyday realities of Britain’s Muslims – the journey from being ‘black’ to ‘terrorist’, as noted above. Hughes (1945) has explained how social situations result in contradictions and dilemmas of status and in what follows we will focus on how Muslim identity is ‘performed’ during three key moments.

*The Rushdie Affair:* For several respondents, the Muslim identity as key public identification of British Muslims, above race, ethnicity or regional identifications, emerged with the Rushdie affair – see Modood 1990; Asad 1990; Piscatori 1990; Sardar and Davies 1990. Two of our established intellectuals and writers (Academic 5 and Academic 10), responded in the way they knew best, through writing.

Academic 5 ...the *Satanic Verses* affair burst on the scene in late ‘88, early 1989 and that’s really ... what made me then think about being a Muslim. And my father who was a devout

Muslim and ...my spiritual mentor - I spoke to him about it. I realised how hurt he was ...and I realised that Muslims weren't going to be able to take this. Because up to that point my instincts were pretty libertarian ...so yeah, 'let's talk about things rather than ban books'

Ahmad Many people would argue that the academic discourses in relation to ethnicity and race and racism were felt wanting in terms of dealing with *Satanic Verses* and the way in which Muslims reacted.

Academic 5 Yeah, well I entirely agree with that and so I said to my Dad 'what can someone like me do?' ... He said 'look, our family has a strong sense of public service and public duty, you are a privileged person with the education you have achieved, you should help your community in whatever ways that you can. But I will give you one piece of advice and that is don't get entangled with the Mullahs' and ... in a way I have just followed that advice.

Academic 10 also engaged in a range of intellectual interventions – writing, speaking and appearances in media. While defending the right of Muslims to be offended by the *Satanic Verses*, these and other respondents argued the importance of the kind of interventions above; arguing one's case rather than burning books. According to our respondents, the Rushdie affair had firmly separated Muslims apart from other minority ethnic and faith communities. Muslims now personified 'otherness'. The affair created a stigmatised identity with negative stereotypes of the alien, uncompromising, un-British Muslim firmly ingrained in the public imagination in a matter of days. Muslims were no longer a collective of diverse communities but were portrayed as a monolithic, immutable mass, behaving in deterministic manner against the interests and values of civilised Western people.

*September 11 and July 7*: While Muslims were associated with intolerance and backwardness after the Rushdie affair, many respondents noted that they were being labelled as terrorists and extremists after the 9/11 and 7/7 bombings, having to work hard to resist this ascribed 'master status'. 'I think ... 9/11, as a moment, has had a defining impact on identity, place, purpose and that is having an impact', noted a one time senior civil servant (Policy 5) working closely with the British government in September 2001, a view also supported by a female parliamentarian (Politic 4):

... there was a different view of Muslims as being at least industrious and relatively quiet and that really was completely shattered by 9/11. So we now have the added burden of terrorism and Islamophobia - which does make it extremely difficult. I mean, two difficulties - one is that the label terrorist, ... but also any money that the Government is spending they are spending it on extremism. So if we want to do any kind of community research we have to adopt the name extremist, do it under the label extremism in one way or another, albeit preventing extremism.

Almost all our interviewees protested that following the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and 7/7, the media have used essentialist 'securitised' (Brown 2008) portrayals of Muslims: As a senior local politician (Politic 3) put it, exaggerating to make a point, '...the image of the Muslim after 9/11 has become so distorted that every Muslim now is perceived to be a terrorist...' In Mamdani's words this has created notions of 'good Muslims' who are 'secular and westernized' and 'bad Muslims' who are 'anti-modern and fanatical' (Mamdani 2004); and our respondents argued that 'good Muslims' were constantly challenged by government and the media to repudiate radicalism and terrorism. The discussion of the stigmatization of Muslim identity as inherently 'extremist' also opens up the question of 'authenticity claims' that is who is accepted as a legitimate member of the specific social group and who is not. Our respondents reacted not only against the external stereotypes but also against extremists and terrorists, with whom, in their view, the British Muslims have little sympathy. They also resented the constant

external demands, including from the government, that ‘moderate Muslims’ demonstrate their loyalty to the state by standing up against the radicals in their communities, arguing that the communities are already doing this, but they will not do this if ordered to do so (e.g. Academic 1).

*Israeli attack on Gaza:* The Israeli attack on Gaza (which took place in late 2008, during the fieldwork) was viewed by many Muslims as a time when they felt compelled to exert their Muslim identity. Muslim anger was evident in the media, local communities, mosques and street demonstrations –where the majority of demonstrators were non-Muslims, a point noted as a sign of hope by many respondents. We illustrate the significance of this event with reference to one respondent (policy 8). This respondent expressed both anger and the determination to make her contribution. The event clearly impacted on her sense of who she was. Reflecting the contingent nature of identity, she described herself as ‘forty times a woman before a Muslim before the Gaza conflict, forty times a Muslim than a woman now’, thus revealing the inter-subjective and interactional order of identity formation (Evereti 2006b). As someone who makes common cause with women and men of other faiths and no faith, around a number of areas of civic engagement, she was outraged at what she regarded as carnage of women, children and men in Gaza, while the world stood aside. This sentiment was widely shared across Britain’s Muslim (and large swathes of non-Muslim) population, including anger over British government’s policy in relation to the Middle East which alienates Muslims and, according to many other respondents, may contribute to the radicalisation of younger people.

... international policy has a huge, huge amount to do with radicalisation, that’s where a lot of the anger comes from. If you get three meals a day and got a roof over your head, you are pretty much chilled out... But the thing is your brothers and sisters aren’t chilled out [in other countries], your brothers and sisters are getting battered and they are using your tax money to do it ... For me, it is a massive issue - and I know - I have got to admit Gaza happened - I was -

if there was ever a time I was going to get up that would have been it and it was only because I had the wherewithal to know that Palestinians didn't need another martyr, that stopped me...(Policy 8)

Events in Gaza spurred her to act, an example of pockets of strong leadership being provided by Muslim women:

...we just –... raised £15,000 and that was just a bunch of girls that got together that were affected and we thought like 'what do we do?' The other thing that we do is we are politically mobilising. I am a political activist anyway, but even having been one of those, I sat there for so long after the first bomb fell, just thinking 'how could I have let this happen?', knowing full well that I had not done enough and I think there is a growing understanding amongst Muslims, particularly Muslim youth, but also I would say ... the thirty somethings - there is an understanding that we haven't done enough ... in ... standing up and saying 'no, enough is enough and we are not having this anymore'... I heard [young people] say 'we will never let this happen again and we will do what it takes to never let it happen'.

Young Muslim women and men (in alliance with non-Muslim) students were prominent in demonstrations and other action, including peaceful sit-ins in 22 British universities –agreements with the university administrations to end sit-ins, resulted in pledges of several million pounds in book and equipment aid to Palestinian universities.

This respondent made an important distinction between Muslim and Islamic identities. The former she described, as a 'cultural' identity, not tied to religiosity but to a sense of belonging to the Muslim

Ummah. Therefore outrage may be equally felt among the devout in the mosque as among the less devout in the pub (see also Samad, 1992).

## **Conclusions**

We have presented the perspectives of our respondents without laboriously comparing and contrasting the views of the three categories of 'elite', nor of men and women. Instead we have brought out differences where appropriate. We have noted that the older respondents found it difficult to maintain a sustained narrative around Muslimness and some framed Muslim oppression in terms of racism. Many have noted the racialisation of Muslims, which justifies their treatment as an undifferentiated threat to civilisation (Kundani, 2007; Brown 2008; Naber, 2009; Grewal, 2009). Mostly, women and men held similar perspectives. However, women were more likely to refer to issues of gender than men, but several of the men accepted that Muslims were less accepting of women than was Islam, a theme of recent Muslim feminist scholarship (e.g. Ahmed, 1992; Wadud, 2007). The participants' accounts in this study demonstrate diverse ways of being Muslim, the challenges that Muslims in Britain face and how they negotiate plural identities.

It was evident in our respondents' narratives that their orientation to different identities becomes an important link between interaction and encompassing social order (Zimmerman 1998). Activities in a certain setting produce 'identities-as-context' (for example 'Muslim identity' post 9/11) where participants continuously realign their situated identities in order to assume or resist a particular meaning attached to them (e.g. 'terrorist'). 'Muslim' becomes the 'master status' (Hughes 1945), both externally assigned and, at least by many, aspired to internally. The master status carries with it cultural stereotypes such as 'terrorist' or 'extremist', as 'auxiliary traits'. We have noted the efforts to resist these external impositions with reference to the historical and spatial diversity of Islam (Fletcher 1992;

Armstrong 2000). We also noted the tension among some respondents, straining to maintain a narrative of unity by referring to normative positions of oneness of Islam, while at least temporarily ignoring de-facto diversity and division (Werbner 1991).

The relationship of Muslimness to the state apparatus of definition and control was also noted. British foreign policy was noted as a problem and associated, by our respondents, with radicalization of young men. Respondents resisted external impositions of Muslim leadership, arguing for a plurality of leadership, including leadership by younger people. While many were critical of the current status of Muslim leadership, we also noted welcome positive leadership being provided by women and younger people, and according to some respondents, a new mood to challenge oppression of fellow Muslims. However, just as Section 11 funding in the 1980s was recognized for its perverse impact on creating 'distinct cultural needs', thus fragmenting more inclusive alliances and collective voluntary sector provision of services, so the current funding under Preventing Violent Extremism is related by respondents to de-facto acceptance of state definitions of Muslim problems. The state thus associates radicalism directly with extremist violence, and funds its prevention in isolation from tackling poverty, low educational attainment or unemployment, all inherent and indelible problems (see Platt 2007); Muslims accept this in order to gain whatever limited funding is available. Thus the state defines through its ideological, legal and administrative apparatuses, that what it does is in the best interests of the Muslim communities (see Ahmed 1992 for historical parallels in relation to Egypt). As our respondents noted, Muslim identity in Britain has widely been associated with intolerance, rigidity and alienness; public image of Muslims therefore remains one of 'otherness'. Mamdani notes that such essentialist characterizations are the result of what he calls 'culture talk', which sees something inherently wrong with Islam rather than providing a political analysis of our times.

Identities become transparent on boundaries of social interaction. While our respondents note that the construction of Muslim identity and its alignment with ‘otherness’ has impacted on the everyday interactions with non-Muslims, the meanings of Muslimness come into sharper relief during, what we have called, ‘key moments’. We chose two key moments which our respondents regarded as particularly significant in ‘making us Muslims’, and the third because of its currency as it took place during data collection. The Rushdie affair and September 11 were regarded as key definitional moments which impacted not just on public association of Muslims with intolerance, alienness and danger, they also challenged both the theoretical nomenclature for understanding population diversity in Britain and the policy apparatuses constructed around notions of culture, race and racism (see Sardar and Davies 1990; Parekh 1990; Modood 1990, and on 2001 street disturbances, Amin 2002).

In this study, the notion of being a ‘Muslim’ presents itself as a complex and contested construction, differentially and contingently espoused by the Muslim community, often competing with other identifications (see Baumann 1996 for broader debate), but uniformly imposed externally as a homogenous identity.

### **Acknowledgements**

Our heartfelt thanks to the respondents for generously sparing time for these conversations and to Karl Atkin and the two anonymous referees for their helpful comments.

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Table 1: The sample

Category	Gender		National background								Total
	Men	Women	Pakistani	Indian	Bangladesh i	Turkish	Libya n	Saudi- Arabia n	Egyptian	Iranian	
Political	3	3	1	2	1	1				1	<b>6</b>
Policy	7	1	5	2		1					<b>8</b>
Academic	5	5	6	1			1	1	1		<b>10</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>24</b>

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