

## MODERNIZATION AND ISLAMIC EDUCATION: MUSLIM WOMEN'S IDENTITY IN BRITAIN

Rukhaiyah Binti Haji Abd Wahab<sup>1</sup>  
Shukri Ahmad<sup>2</sup>

School of Languages, Civilisation and Philosophy, College of Arts and Sciences, UUM

<sup>1</sup> hubba\_1980@yahoo.com

<sup>2</sup> shuk494@uum.edu.my

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**Abstract:** *In a traditional British Muslim family in Britain, particularly within the South Asian community, there is a belief that the behaviour of females needs to be controlled in order to preserve male honour. Within this traditional context, education for women has often been seen as detrimental to the family's izzat (honour). This has produced a great deal of debate, with some reformists asserting that such attitudes are cultural so and no part of the Quran and Sunnah. The main aim of this study is to explore the provision of Islamic education for Muslim girls and women in Britain. Despite public images of docility and victimhood they are actively negotiating the boundaries of cultural tradition in the context of emerging British Muslim identities. This research argues that Muslim women in Britain nowadays have begun seeking out good quality Islamic education for themselves and for their children, a process which is slowly resulting in more 'modern' interpretations of Islam that challenge the cultural values adopted by traditionalists. This finding can be concluded that British Muslim women's education is not limited to modernist and reformist Muslim institutions, with many traditionalists (such as Barelwis and Deobandis) now also rejecting the ideology that women should stay at home, and the notion that education can harm their izzat and sharam (without any shame). In fact, this perception is no longer justifiable in a modern society, whilst it also contravenes widely held interpretations of Islam, which consider women's rights to an education to be equally strong to those of men.*

**Keywords:** *Modernity, Muslim Women's Identity, Islamic Education*

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### Introduction

Rippin (2003: 178) argues that 'modernity is that which has created fundamental changes in behavior and beliefs about economics, politics, social organization and intellectual discourse'. Such changes have gradually occurred everywhere around the globe, and modernity can be seen as 'a world phenomenon' (Rippin, 2003: 178) although it maps out in different ways in different societies. In the sphere of Muslim women's education there have been radical changes

in the Muslim world in terms of state education, mass literacy and most recently the emergence of the new media and new public spheres which in turn have impacted upon traditional structures of religious authority (Eickelman and Anderson 2003). As well as the modernist elites who first encountered change in Western-style schools, Muslim women's education *per se* was also taken up as an issue by many Islamic revivalist movements in countries such as Egypt (Hefner, 2007; Pandya, 2012). According to Hefner (2007: 3), then, the modernizing of Islamic education has resulted in four main outcomes: an increased variety of Muslim educational institutions; transformations in *madrasahs* and Islamic higher education through modern social and intellectual developments; state efforts to reform and modernise Islamic education; and changes undertaken for 'the future of Islamic education in an age of globalisation and pluralisation'.

Against this general context, some modernist, feminist and reformist Muslim women scholars such as Mernissi (1991) and Ahmed (1992) have experienced modernity as the realization of women's disadvantages in society, politics, economics and education. Although producing both more liberal and conservative interpretations, they have therefore re-interpreted patriarchal Muslim traditions with reference to the authentic Islamic resources – the *Quran* and *Sunnah* (Roald, 2001: 91). For ordinary Muslim girls and mothers, too, an Islamic education also often begins when they 'return to religion' to seek answers to their modern problems and concerns with education, work and marriage. They increasingly 'return', however, 'not to the traditional indigenous understanding of religion, but to textual Islam as interpreted by educated religious scholars' (Pandya, 2012: 56). Moving away from blindly-followed religion and culture not only provides for a 'purification of their religious beliefs', but also for 'a move toward social progress, education and modernity' (Pandya, 2012: 55).

In the context of Britain such modern trends are observable, too, and have begun to give women new skills through which to engage with the world. Muslim women are creating spaces for themselves and other women to grow in their religious identities (cf. Modood, 2005; Smalley, 2006; Abbas, 2007). Some of them choose to participate in religious communities<sup>1</sup> with other women, such as mosques and study circles, whilst others get religious instruction from the internet and the media, and still others promote the home as the source of instruction or send their children to voluntary-aided or independent Muslim schools.

### ***Muslim Women Identity, Modernity and Generational Change***

The self-identity for Pakistani Muslim women in the UK is bounded by the culture, belief and tradition. Muslims women in Britain are very much aware of the potential to lose aspects of their religion and culture through interactions with a modern, secular and multi-ethnic society (Smalley, 2006). Therefore, most of the first generation South Asians neither said they were entirely 'British' nor wanted to be, and had a strong sense of their own culture. They placed a strong emphasis on family, kinship and neighbours (Modood et al., 1994: 97). Anwar (1998) and Shaw (2000: 294) have argued that concepts such as physical security, family/*baradari* (extended patrilineal kinship group, clan), marriage, religion, and area or country of origin, all 'played a part in setting the dimensions of community boundaries and conversely strengthened the bond of community leading to encapsulation' (Shaw, 2000: 294). In a similar tone, but highlighting racism and exclusion that went unaddressed in the 1960s and 1970s, Parekh (2000:

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<sup>1</sup> There are numerous Muslim seminars, courses, talks and events organised by Muslim organisations across Britain.

27) has claimed that 'their sense of community owes as much to how they are treated as to where they came from'.

Additionally, Yilmaz (2005: 50-51) argues that ethnic minorities developed avoidance and resistance strategies. Muslim settlers felt most safe in their own communities (Anwar 1998: 139), and according to Anwar (1998) and Yilmaz (2005: 30), these minorities 'have refused to be assimilated and have in fact become more ethnic and more distinctive through their attempts to resist assimilation' and integration. Jacobson (1998), Modood (2005) and Smalley (2006) claim that the second generations in these communities have been labelled as confused and disaffected youngsters as a result of the 'restrictions' and social boundaries set by their parents. However, according to Raza (1993), and Butler (2001: 50), many Muslim parents feel that the second generation is a 'lost generation', who are being enticed away from Islam by the influence of the 'un-Islamic values' of British society. Similarly, Eade (1991), Werbner (1991), Brah (1992), Dwyer (1997), Haw (1998), Shaw (2000) and Abbas (2005) argue that young British Muslims are influenced by a complex interaction of personal, community and social beliefs that leave them 'caught between two cultures' and involved in a 'cultural clash' between their 'home' and 'British' ways of life.

According to Raza (1993), Muslim identities became altered and weakened by a number of factors: westernization via the 'income factor' (i.e. through becoming integrated into the class structure and culture of British society by employment); through education in the state school system; through their peers at school; through the medium of language transmitting the ideas, values and knowledge of the dominant society and culture; and, finally, through the society itself, which can devalue other cultures and lifestyles (Butler, 2001: 51). Therefore, it is undeniable that parents leave no room for the 'take the best, leave the rest' attitude of the western value-system and counteract the influence of their new contexts (Lewis, 2007). However, Lewis (2007: 39) perceives the 'take the best and leave the rest' approach to allow the process of discernment to take place, and argues that without it, Muslim children could become 'culturally schizophrenic or be locked into an identity crisis'. Given this dynamic, a process of reinventing tradition could be developed, 'in the sense that they have emerged at least one step removed from the original model' (Ballard, n.d: 13).

According to Parekh (2000: 27), Muslims have been 'constantly changing and reconstructing themselves through fusing their traditions of origin with elements of the majority culture [that they have settled in]', whilst still adhering to Islamic values. This approach may enable these young British Muslims to become clearer about their religious identities, as it allows them to gain a more sharpened understanding of what is central to Islam and how to apply this in their lives, whilst also being British citizens. According to the activist Badawi<sup>2</sup>, the new generation of British Muslims are 'entering into the mainstream of British society whilst maintaining their Muslim identity. They accept Islamic prescriptions about modest dress but want that to be in a Western style. They want to eat Italian food, but it must be *halal* pizza.'

For Muslim women in Britain, the shift in attitudes and behaviours is most visible among the generation of grown-up British-born Muslim women. Many are increasingly challenging traditional attitudes and customs; moulding new identities that encompass some traditional values, whilst integrating them with new ones; and adopting cultural values that suit their needs

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<sup>2</sup> See Hussain, S.G (n.d) Muslim Britain. [www.islamicsupremecouncil.com/muslimbritain.htm](http://www.islamicsupremecouncil.com/muslimbritain.htm) (Retrieved on 30 September 2008).

(Werbner, 2002). Within their cultural boundaries, they are often less trapped by concepts of *sharam*, *izzat* and *biradari* (Shaw, 2000; Lewis, 2007; Gilliat-Ray, 2010).

Jawad and Benn (2003: 55) observes that in the past, for complex reasons of social status, educational background and cultural ideology, women have often been discouraged from continuing in education within some South Asian and other Muslim families. If they stand up for their rights, women may be accused of bringing ‘shame’ to the family, and seen to be challenging *izzat* (honour). Indeed, sometimes ‘female education is viewed as a threat to the traditional customs and way of life of the community’ (Jawad & Benn, 2003: 55). In fact, in communities where they have traditionally been rare, educated Muslim women are often viewed with suspicion when they exercise their assertiveness, question patriarchy or challenge tradition. Parents with a particular background may believe that education will liberate a woman, and regard this as a threat to the ‘traditional’ stereotype of the wife or daughter-in-law, who is expected by many men to be obedient, subservient and to question nothing (Raza, 1991; Jawad & Benn, 2003). However, while some Muslims males may seek to root this perception of female education in religion, it is contested by many others (Raza, 1991; Jawad & Benn, 2003; Rizvi, 2007). The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) encouraged both men and women to acquire knowledge equally, “from the cradle to the grave” (Jawad & Benn, 2003:12).

Nowadays, they have become more open and keen to actively participate in society, politics and the economy (Werbner, 2002). In terms of economic activity, for example, they have started to work in order to support their families financially and are the main breadwinners in some cases. In terms of their participation in society, they establish Muslim women’s organizations, and organize events and activities ‘with the community, which appropriately challenge the Muslim community’s position concerning the place of women and their needs’ (Irving et al., 2003). The most prominent of these organizations is the An-Nisa Society in London, which aims to protect the rights of Muslim women in social and political policies.

The outside factors that encourage women to this shift in attitude are derived from education and support from Muslim organizations and leadership. Some mosques now open the door for women (Maqsood, 2005; Khan, 2010) due to the changing attitude of *Imams*, who have begun to engage with and address the social, educational and political realities facing Muslims in contemporary Britain, as well as contextualizing Islam in wider society (Jacobson, 1998: 167; Maqsood, 2005; Khan, 2010). To some extent Muslim educational organizations like the Association of Muslim Schools (AMS) encourage the rights of Muslim girls in Muslim Independent schools. Elsewhere, organisations like The Muslim Youth Helpline<sup>3</sup> focus on the development of both male and female young Muslims, through education, social and spiritual programmes to encourage teenagers to become active British Muslims. Teenage Muslim girls are encouraged to participate in its programmes and events, including in sports and camps, a rarity for Muslim girls in the past.

Nowadays, some good examples of active Muslim women in the UK include the Al-Masoom Foundation – established by a group of Pakistani Muslim women led by Mrs. Khan in Manchester (Werbner, 2002), the An-Nisa society in Brent, London<sup>4</sup> and Salma Yaqoob – ‘the leader of the Respect Party and in 2006 she was elected as a city councillor for Sparkbrook ward on Birmingham City Council’<sup>5</sup>. The drives of these politically active and prominent

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<sup>3</sup> The Muslim Youth see <http://www.muslimyouth.net/about> (Retrieved on 14 March 2013).

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.an-nisa.org/>

<sup>5</sup> Salma Yaqoob see [http://www.salmayaqoob.com/2010/01/salma-yaqoob\\_31.html](http://www.salmayaqoob.com/2010/01/salma-yaqoob_31.html) (Retrieved on 5 March 2012)

Muslim women to be involved in shaping British Muslim society are inspired by majority of Muslim women across the UK.

### ***Islamic Education for Muslim Women***

In modernity progressive Muslim intellectuals have been extremely supportive of greater equality and education for Muslim women, often appealing to reformed interpretations of the Islamic sources (Benn, 1998; Jawad, 2003; Azam, 2006; Zaman, 2007). In recent decades Muslim women in Britain have also begun to redefine themselves and their role in society through studying the fundamentals of Islam. As Geaves (1996:60) contends: ‘this new awareness has come about not only because of the need for Muslim women to redefine themselves in Britain but also because of an increased awareness of religion brought about by the resurgence of Islam worldwide’. In Britain, the vitality of Muslim women’s education can be seen through i) the establishment of Muslim schools and ii) the mushrooming of registered Muslim organisations that run study circles for women and mothers across Britain.

### ***Islamic Education for Girls The Mosque***

Mosque schools or supplementary schools provide a range of educational activities for Muslim children, including language (such as Urdu or Bengali), the Quran, tajweed, and basic knowledge of Islam. Classes generally run every evening and are attended by Muslim children between five and fourteen years old. In Quran teaching, the teacher usually sits with his back to the wall while listening and checking students’ recitations of the Quran. The classes separate boys and girls, who are then taught by a teacher of their own gender (Gilliat-Ray, 2010). During the teaching, the students will sit on the floor with their legs crossed and the teaching takes up to two hours per day (Cherti et al., 2011). Recent estimates suggest that there are around 250,000 Muslim children attending these schools, which operate at 2,000 places in the United Kingdom (Abrams, 2011).

Shadid and Koningsveld (1995: 24) and Scourfield et al. (2013) suggested that the *imam*, in addition to being a prayer leader, could function as a teacher for children as well, but would need to contextualise the learning in order to make it relevant to young British Muslims. Understanding the *Quran* is important for every practicing Muslim, especially those living in non-Muslim countries, who need to also understand how to contextualise it in relation to their host societies (Abrams, 2011; Cherti et al., 2011).

### ***Independent Muslim Schools (IMS)***

The teaching and learning processes at IMS differs from that which children receive in state schools. The curriculum, pedagogy and ethos are designed in the light of the *Quran* and *Sunnah* so that the Muslim character of children can be built into the education they receive (Jenkins, 1995; Ansari, 2004; Halstead, 2005; Gilliat-Ray, 2010). In terms of pedagogy, independent Muslim schools are more structured than supplementary schools and mosques though it is difficult to generalise, and like state schools they may encourage more two-way communication between students and teachers, with students being more likely to be encouraged to actively participate in the classroom.

Both the environment and ethos of Muslim Schools tends to differ from those of state schools in various ways. For example, the Islamic ethos is often visualised through school uniform, with students covering the *aurah* (Certain part of the body that Muslim women need to cover from others to see) inside the school. Prayer times are allocated, and these schools also recognize Muslim holidays and festivals, with homeland visits also often being accommodated (Haw, 1998: 67). In relation to the co-curriculum, the students are provided with Islamic societies at school, such as the Muslim Scouts. Thus, the ethos at Muslim schools tends to reinforce the cultural, linguistic and religious identities of pupils, and this is further supported by the content of teaching in many Muslim schools, which is integrated with the values and culture of Islam.

A number of Muslim independent schools have now been established across Britain, particularly in areas with high Muslim populations. There are currently 172 fee-paying Muslim schools in Britain<sup>6</sup>, which are attended by approximately three per cent of the Muslim children in Britain. However, due to a lack of support from the community and the state in terms of finances, these schools often face financial problems, which have led to their inability to provide adequate facilities and teaching resources (Halstead, 2005; Gilliat-Ray, 2010: 151). Again, it is difficult to generalise about this sector but there is often a high turnover of the teachers in Independent Muslim schools and they receive lower salaries typically as compared to state schools.

### ***Voluntary- Aided Muslim Schools (VA)***

The establishment of VA Muslim schools is ‘seen to be of symbolic significance as a demonstration that British Muslims have the legal right to a distinctive form of education alongside other faith communities in Britain’ (Gilliat-Ray, 2010: 151). Hence, under the entitlement of Education Acts 1944, 1988 and 1994, schools with a large majority of Muslim children can apply to be re-established as Muslim voluntary aided schools or state funded schools if the school reaches the national standard of British schooling. Importantly, all of the aspects – curriculum, pedagogy and ethos – at VS schools are similar to those at Independent Muslim schools (IMS).

According to Halstead (2005), less than 0.5 per cent of Muslim children are currently educated in state-funded Muslim schools. Indeed, historically, it was unclear how widespread the desire for Muslim schools amongst Muslim parents, although now that it is free to attend schools such as Feversham College in Bradford are oversubscribed. However, despite significant expansion, such schools serve no more than a tiny minority of Muslim pupils and are not available in many areas (Ansari, 2004: 333).

### ***Islamic Education for Mothers Study Circles***

Today, many mosques and organizations run study circles for women or mothers. According to Gilliat-Ray (2010: 217-220), *Quranic* and Islamic study circles were first established by Muslim women back in the 1970s, and were usually convened by women in their homes, in mosques or in community centres. Hence, these circles were described as ‘important loci of inter-household women-centred’ activity (Werbner 1991: 156). They have provided spaces for

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<sup>6</sup> See <http://ams-uk.org/muslim-schools/> (Retrieved on 26 March 2013).

women 'to become conversant with Islamic sources and this has enabled them to articulate their Islamic rights' (Afshar, 1998: 119; see Gilliat-Ray, 2010: 220). These circles are usually led by a scholar or by knowledgeable Muslim women, and enable women to learn about and discuss Islam, the *Quran*, *fiqh*, Islamic doctrine and issues surrounding Islam and being a Muslim (Gilliat-Ray, 2010: 217). The participant is free to give her opinion and ask questions about the issues discussed. Therefore, they provide 'regular and more formalized opportunities for groups of women to learn about their faith together' and develop intellectual, emotional and social skills (Gilliat-Ray, 2010: 217).

For some mothers, study circles provide an important means for resisting exclusion and a way to enter a feminist discourse in which they are free to express their Islamic rights from within their tradition (Afshar, 1998; Samad, 1998; Butler, 1999; Gilliat-Ray, 2010: 220). Samad (1998: 436, see Gilliat-Ray, 2010: 220) claims that the ability of these women 'to differentiate between cultural attitudes and more normative Islamic tradition and teaching has enabled them to lever open spaces that were foreclosed by the older generation'. Muslim women are now also responding to the need to work in other contexts to achieve community cooperation and to help educate other women about what it means to be Muslim. Today there are well-established Islamic study circles for women (young and old) throughout Britain, such as those run by the Islamic Society of Britain (ISB), and numerous mosques also provide women's study circles with venues regardless of women's sects, ethnicities or religious orientations.

### ***Modernity and Islamic Education: Impact to Muslim Women's Identity***

Islamic education plays a vital role in developing and promoting Islamic identity to the Muslim girls and women. Islamic education is not only preserve the Islamic heritage and value per se, but contributes towards development and progress of the Muslim *Ummah* in general (Sound, 2017). According to Fawzia (n.d), the aim of an Islamic education is to allow the student to realize ideals and gain an education that enhances his spiritual, intellectual, imaginative, physical, scientific and linguistic growth that allows a Muslim to build a positive relationship with God and human.

Similarly, Sharif (1976, p. 45) argues that Islamic education is 'the device for helping an individual to full stature'. His elaboration involves the 'assimilation of Divine attributes' leading to a life of 'unity, power, freedom, truth, beauty, goodness, love, and justice' (ibid). This total commitment to character-building based on the ideals of Islamic ethics is the highest goal of Islamic education. (Al-Attas, 1979, p. 104).

Due to the modernization, globalization, and secularization, it is necessary for Muslim women to understand how to behave in society. In other words, women must be aware of the values and virtues society wants as they face new life demands. The existence Muslim schools clearly shows that parents are very concern about the importance of Islamic education. Muslim schools contribute in moulding a generation of Muslims who are pious and have the ability to preach and practice the Islamic way of life as instructed by Allah. Abdul Halim el-Muhammady (1994) explained that Muslim schools give focus on several concepts namely; life-long learning, to be a responsible human beings and to preach and practice the Islam. In fact, this school promotes piety, honesty, propriety, trustworthiness, passion and good moral values (Khadijah, 2009).

The aim of teaching Islamic education is to develop and promote moral character. Studies in Islamic education have established that teaching good behaviour is an important component

which enhances the development of individual potential in a holistic, balanced and integrated manner, encompassing the intellectual, spiritual, and physical aspects (Abd Halim et.al, 2004). Azra (2008) points out that education aims at holistic human development. Education should therefore help people develop spiritually, intellectually, and socially. Al-Syaibani (1979) notes that there are three objectives of Islamic education: first, human objectives which are related to self improvement in form of knowledge, behaviour, intelligence and self-actualization. Second, is the social objective related to living together, and third, professional objective which takes education and learning as an important component considering Islamic education as field of knowledge, an art, and as professional as well as a social activity in the community.

This then provides Muslim girls and women a tangible resource from which to develop their identity. For their parents, ethnicity and regionalism may have taken as much, if not more, importance than religion, but for subsequent generations religion has often been the key factor in determining identity. This is particularly the case for young women. The resurgence that can be seen amongst young Muslims of their religious identity does in many cases correspond to an increased level of knowledge and practice.

Hence, it enables Muslim women to engage with and adapt to the contemporary societies that they live in whilst retaining their Muslim identities. Muslim women are now also responding to the need to work in other contexts to achieve community cooperation and to help educate other women about what it means to be Muslim. To achieve this end, they need support from both the Muslim community and the state – through Muslim organizations and leadership and state-recognition of their Muslim rights as Muslim women citizens.

## **Conclusion**

Within Muslim society, individuals and organisations have cooperated in providing Islamic education to the community through Muslim organisations and institutions. The British state supports these initiatives to some extent, but the hard work comes from the Muslim community itself. Today, the mushrooming of the provision of Islamic education in the United Kingdom shows that Muslim girls and mothers are aware of the importance of Islamic education.

The attitudes and habits of Muslim women on education have also shifted through their interactions with contemporary British society. They are often less trapped within their culture through the operation of *sharam*, *izzat* and *biradari*. Today, there are varieties of female educational provisions such as single-sex school, study circles or *halaqat* which allowed women to claim their right for education.

In conclusion, all the issues involving modernity, Islamic education and Muslim girls and women in the UK require the Muslim community to show commitment to their values, and support is required from the state to ensure that the needs of Muslim women in education are fulfilled within multicultural and multi-faith British society.



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