Why Are British Muslims Writing?

Interviews with Three British Muslim Memoir Writers

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INTRODUCTION

> What determines Muslim belonging anyway? Geography? Ideology? Linguistics? Should Muslim writing be halal, and avoid beer and heresy? Should it intend to prevent vice and promote virtue? – if so, late Tolstoy was a Muslim writer (Yassin-Kassab, 2009, online).

In social science scholarship on British Muslims, the field of Muslim writing has received some recent academic interest. Although scholarship in this area is somewhat limited, it has so far been concerned with analysing representations of Muslim identity in popular fiction and nonfiction (Nash 2012, Morey and Yaqin 2011), examining Muslim writing as a generic category in modern literature (Chambers 2011, Fitzpatrick 2009) and attempting to understand who the category 'Muslim writers' is inclusive of (Chambers 2011). Moreover, the work of Petley and Richardson (2011) and Brubaker (2013) supplements scholarly understanding about representations of Muslims in popular fiction and nonfiction. Drawing on this current research, my study will examine the ideas and opinions of three mainstream British Muslim memoir writers in relation to their reasons for writing. This introduction will attempt to understand what is meant by the category 'Muslim writers' and explore how the generic category of Muslim writing has emerged.

Muslim Writers

Any research conducted on Muslims will face the necessary task of defining what 'Muslim' means. Definitions of 'Muslim' account for who is included in this category and who is excluded, as well as the common themes and topics (if any) that are represented by this category. Traditionally, Western scholarship has analysed the category 'Muslim' from an essentialist standpoint, grouping together diverse ethnic communities into a homogenous, undifferentiated mass (Ahmad and Evergeti, 2010, 1697). This provides an extremely restricted understanding. As Halliday (2010) points out in his analysis of Muslims in Britain:

> Any empirical study of particular individuals or migrant groups that are termed 'Muslim' will soon recognise differences of ethnic, linguistic, political and social character that these peoples, divided into at least 60 countries, exhibit, and the

> inadequacy, when not inaccuracy, of using terms like 'British Muslim' at all (Halliday, 2010, xii).

In her book *British Muslim Fictions*, Chambers acknowledges the inherent difficulties pertaining to this category. She chooses to use the term 'literature by writers of Muslim heritage' rather than 'Islamic English Literature' or 'Muslim Writing,' to allow 'the inclusion of authors from different cultures, nationalities, political and religious positions' (Chambers, 2011, 268). The term 'heritage' moves away from essentialist interpretations of 'Muslim' which homogenise diverse communities into a solidary group. Moreover, the term avoids definitions which tend to overemphasise the centrality of religion in the lives of Muslims 'by focusing on the conspicuously visible, vocal and devout practitioners' (Brubaker, 2012, 6). In this way, it 'eschews problematic judgements about whether or not a Muslim is sufficiently religious' (Chambers, 2011, 7). Chamber's definition is inclusive of culture, validating the inclusion of Muslim writers from secular backgrounds who may identify as 'Muslims' culturally. As Modood argues, being a Muslim is not necessarily about belief, but a sense of belonging. 'The South Asia I am from' he explains, 'is contoured by communal religious identities. It has nothing to do with belief. If you assert "I am an atheist" people will still think it meaningful to ask 'yes, but are you a Muslim, a Hindu?' (cited in Petley and Richardson, 2011, 10).

According to this argument, being a Muslim is as much about culture and nationality as religious belief. This is something expressed by a number of Chambers' interviewees. British novelist, Leila Aboulela reflects:

> There are many Muslim writers and they're writing different sorts of Muslim novels…many of these writers prefer to be considered nationally as a Pakistani writer or an Egyptian writer…I do feel that I'm like them: I'm a Sudanese writer…but for me, instead of having Islam as a culture, I'm consciously presenting it as a faith (Chambers, 2011, 106).

Thus, as clearly implied through these arguments, definitions of 'Muslim' should not dismiss the significance of culture and heritage. That said, the importance of the religious component should also not be understated. Just as Aboulela 'consciously presents' faith in her writing, so too do the writers in this study. These writers are

Shelina Zahra Janmohamed, author of *Love in a Headscarf (2009),* Naima B. Robert, author of *From My Sisters' Lips (2006),* and a third writer who wishes to remain anonymous. For the purpose of this study I shall call her Sarah Khan. All three women self-identify as 'observant' Muslims. Although they differ with regards to the religious 'schools of thought' that they follow,[1] their writing explores overtly religious themes.

In order to emphasise the importance of the religious component in definitions of 'Muslim,' Amin Malak (2005) contends that the term 'Muslim writing' suggests works produced by a person who 'voluntarily and knowingly refers to [himself or herself] as a 'Muslim' when given a selection of identitarian choices' (cited in Behdad, 2007, 277). This person considers religion to be a chief component of his or her identity, rivalling other identity markers such as gender and ethnic affiliation (cited in Chambers, 2011, 269). Although this argument does not make obvious why religion should supersede other identity components for *all* Muslims, nor acknowledges the problem of writers being labelled 'Muslim' against their will,[2] it does point out that religious identity is extremely important for some Muslim writers. In the case of the authors in this study, the religious component transcends other identity components such as gender, race and culture. This is clearly expressed in their writing. The importance of a religious identity must therefore not be understated in research about Muslim writing. That said, individual notions about what constitutes 'religious' Muslim identity must be taken into account and treated on a case by case basis. This is because interpretations of 'religious' and 'good' Muslim behaviour differ from person to person and are thus highly contested and subjective terms.

Combining Amin's observation with Modood's argument about culture, it can be inferred that 'Muslim writers' refers to a vast category of Muslims inclusive of secular authors on the one hand, and religiously motivated authors on the other. Chambers brings some clarity to this group through her utilization of Wittgenstein's concept of family resemblance, as explained by Modood in his book *Multiculturalism* (2007).

[1] Gilliat-Ray (2010) refers to 'schools of thought' as a phrase which reflects the assumption that while 'a fundamental body of practice…unites Muslims throughout the world and through history,' there are nevertheless differences in the 'interpretation and practice' (Gilliat Ray, 2010, 55).

[2] Novelist Monica Ali, author of Brick Lane, is a prime example of this. Chambers believes that Ali refused to be interviewed for the book *British Muslim Fictions* due to her reluctance 'to be pigeonholed as an 'ethnic' let alone Muslim writer' (Chambers, 2011, 20). Despite this, she is referred to as a 'Muslim' writer elsewhere (For example in Nash's book, *Writing Muslim Identity,* 2012, 26).

Modood contends that just as we can detect members of a family despite their variations in eye colour, personality, posture and physique, it is possible to identify Muslims as a group despite their myriad differences in culture, political positions and religious beliefs etc. (Chambers, 2011, 629-670). Like a family, they are loosely connected but divergent. We can therefore understand Muslim writing to refer to a 'unique generic category' by an internally heterogeneous group. According to Chambers, this group is producing 'some of the most interesting fiction [and non-fiction] in the UK today' (Chambers, 2011, 270).

Muslim Writing: A Generic Category

> If you can have Black writing and Gay writing and London writing you can have Muslim writing too. The label, like any other, is limiting if used as a box, but liberating if we use it as a springboard (Yassin-Kassab, 2009, online).

A pertinent question to now ask is how the category of Muslim writing has emerged. It can be inferred from scholarship that such a category did not exist before the 1990s.[3] Like 'Black Writing' and 'Gay Writing,' 'Muslim Writing' is a politicised label which has emerged in response to particular socio-political events in Britain (Yasin-Kassab, 2009 online). Thus it is under the circumstances of the consolidation of Muslim identity in Britain that this category can be understood. Ahmad and Evergeti's research (2010) lends important evidence to this by exploring the making and representation of Muslim identity in Britain. They identify some key political events which have proved crucial to Muslim identity formation, including the Rushdie Affair, the Gulf War, 9/11, 7/7 and the Israeli attack in Gaza in 2008.

Perhaps of all events, the publication of Salman Rushdie's book, *The Satanic Verses* (1988), is the most significant. Prior to this, Muslim identity politics focused on ethnicity. As one of Ahmad and Evergeti's interview respondent's comments: '[we] were Asian …sometimes people referred to [us] as blacks or by nationality such as Pakistani, Bangladeshi and others. But suddenly from the 1980s the two million

[3] For example, when speaking about a novel by Nigel Williams called East of Wimbledon, Chambers comments: 'In 1993, when William's novel was written, the very idea of talking about 'Islamic English Literature' or-my preferred term- 'literature by writers of Muslim heritage' appeared ripe for satire, but now all the questions being posed by Robert in his opening passage are being seriously interrogated' (Chambers, 2011, 5). Moreover, she comments that while some Muslim writers were writing in Britain at the time (Ahdaf Soueif, Abdulrazak Gurnah, Tariq Ali, Hanif Kureshi and Salman Rushdie) they did not necessarily self-identify as 'Muslim' and their writings did not carry the label 'Muslim fiction' as it does now (Chambers, 2011, 6).

people were identified by the whole society as Muslim' (Ahmad and Evergeti, 2010, 1702). The book's perceived insult to the Prophet Muhammad, a figure who is especially revered among traditional south Asian communities,[4] led to outrage from the predominantly South-Asian British Muslim community, resulting in violent protests and controversial acts of book burning (Ahmad and Evergeti, 2010, 1711).[5] This differentiated Muslims from other minority ethnic and faith communities, creating a stigmatized identity with negative stereotypes of alien, uncompromising, un-British Muslims (Ahmed and Evergeti, 2010, 1711). The label 'Muslim' was not simply imposed from the outside. Muslims themselves started articulating their presence in Britain as 'Muslim,' 'rather than as people whose parents have come from…Kashmir or Bangladesh or Gujarat' (Ahmad and Evergeti, 2010, 1702). According to Brubaker (2013) this is because self-identifications are profoundly shaped by the prevailing ways in which people are identified by others (Brubaker, 2013, 2). This is made obvious in Chambers' interview with author Fadia Faqir:

> Wherever I went, I was told I was Muslim. *You* define *me* as a Muslim. Therefore I am a Muslim (Chambers, 2011, 79).

Moreover, the Rushdie Affair highlighted the global dimension to Islamic identity construction. The book, published in England, had the effect of arousing protests among Muslim communities in India and Pakistan. In Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini famously issued a fatwa sentencing Rushdie to death (Mazrui, 1990, 129). As Geaves (2005) explains, Islam is by its nature a supranational religion due to its emphasis on a global *Ummah*. A return to an Islamic identity will therefore naturally increase global Islamic solidarity (Geaves, 2005, 97). Linked to this is the influence of global Islamic reformist movements on the specific British situation. Countries such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Iraq were moving away from national or ethnic

[4] Here I adopt Geaves's use of the term 'traditional' to describe the Islam which acknowledges the 1400 years of scholarly tradition, the four schools of law, the teachings of the Quran and Sunnah, the legal interpretations of the *Ulema*, as well as Sufi contributions to spirituality. This 'version' of Islam was most widely practiced in Britain (Geaves, 2006, 157).

[5] The violent reaction of the South Asian Muslim community can be understood through the historical context of Christian Missionary activity in India from the mid-19th Century. In her book, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900* (2004) Barbara Metcalf examines the polemical arguments between Christian Missionaries and Muslim religious polemicists. As part of their attempt to discredit the Islamic religion in India, Christian Missionaries would attack the character of the Prophet Muhammad to the anger of Indian Muslim communities (Jones, 1992, 198). The publication of the Satanic Verses and the British Government's seemingly unsympathetic response to the resulting protests may have rekindled historical grievances among first generation British Muslims.

identity labels and reasserting their ‘Muslimness’ (Ahmad and Evergeti, 2010, 1703). Fuelled by the changes in these countries, British ‘Muslims’ began to reactively assert a Muslim identification in an attempt to ‘revalorize what [had] been devalorized (Brubaker, 2013, 3). What can be understood from this controversial event therefore is that Muslim identity became a key public identification in competition with race, ethnicity or regional identifications (Ahmad and Evergeti, 2010, 1710).

In the aftermath of this event, writing by Muslims has slowly come to form a generic category. But it is perhaps since 9/11 and 7/7 that this category has gained more importance. While the Rushdie Affair seems to have provoked a need for greater specificity in understanding the group formally known as ‘Blacks’ and ‘Asians’ (Chambers, 2011, 7), 9/11 firmly pushed the label ‘Muslim’ into common currency. However, the subsequent ‘War on Terror’ had the further effect of shifting labels from ‘Muslim’ to ‘Terrorist.’ Accordingly, 9/11 and terrorism has come to characterise narratives about Muslims (Nash 2012, 195). British Muslims have been faced with the ‘burden’ of resisting ‘essentialist’ and ‘securitised’ representations of their identity (Ahmad and Evergeti, 2012, 1712).

In particular, in response to ‘problematic’ fictional narratives exploring the fear and anxiety in society due to the ‘Muslim terrorism threat’ (Nash, 2012, 195), Muslim writers have attempted to use the genre as a spring board for rewriting the ‘terrorist’ identity. They do so by providing a non-Western migrant’s view of what it is like to live in the West, a ‘Third-World’ perspective on America’s global activities, and an insider’s insight into how it feels to belong to a Muslim nation (Nash, 2012, 108). Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2008) is perhaps a prime example of this kind of writing. The novel de-centres the Islamic terrorist threat and instead ‘accounts for the events of 9/11 in terms of the US activities in the Third World and the Muslim migrant’s experiencing of racist othering in the West’ (Nash, 2012, 108).

Aims of this Study

So far I have explored the category ‘Muslim writers’ and examined the emergence of Muslim writing in relation to the formation of Muslim identity in Britain. What now remains is a brief explanation of the purposes of this study.

Importantly, in scholarship about Muslim writing, the studies mentioned above mostly draw upon fiction texts. In comparison, the textual genre of memoir remains relatively under-researched, despite the fact that several authors have contributed to this textual genre for a mainstream readership. [6] These authors include Lucy Bushill-Matthews, Zeba Malik, Ziaddin Saddar, and two of the writers interviewed for this study, Shelina Zahra Janmohamed and Naima B Robert. Although my initial area of interest lay with British Muslim women's fiction and non-fiction writing in general, this topic had too wide a scope for an MA dissertation. As Kumar (1996) points out, 'once you examine a question more closely you will soon realise the complexity of formulating an idea into a problem which is a researchable' (Kumar, 1996, 35). Due to the word restriction of this study and time constraints, my first step was to significantly narrow the focus of my research question. I therefore chose to focus my study on memoir writing.

Firstly, in terms of access, memoir writers proved to be more willing to be interviewed than other writers. This is partly due to gatekeepers, as explained in Section Two but perhaps because (as Section Three explains) the authors self-define as Muslim social activists, clearly establishing a link between their writing and Islamic religious commitments. Because of this, they appear more willing to talk about their narratives. The field of Muslim writing is a vast field attracting new scholarly research. By analysing the ideas and opinions of British Muslim memoir writers in relation to their reasons for writing, I aim to contribute to existing scholarship such as Chambers' *British Muslim Fictions*. The interviews closely examine the themes of the writers' own memoirs and draw upon many of the key concerns mentioned in this introduction.

This study will be organised into four sections. Section One is concerned with methodology and will look at the practicalities of the research process, as well as issues pertaining to ethics and data analysis. Section Two provides a reflection on

[6] This is something Chambers points out in the introduction to her research. She expresses regret at not being able to include works by memoir writers into her book 'British Muslim Fictions.' Her reluctance to mix different genres together is perhaps due to the 'risk of failing to show the proper respect for literary distinctions' by frequently 'drawing together examples from so many different kinds of texts' (Nash, 2012, 2). Chambers comments that a chapter dedicated to memoir writing will be available in her forthcoming work (Chambers, 2011, 5).

the research process. Section Three will then present the findings organised under sub-sections. This is followed by some concluding remarks.

SECTION ONE

METHODOLOGY

This section will address the practicalities of the research process, looking at the choice of research question, the reasons for the chosen qualitative methods, the purpose of semi-structured interviews and the interview procedure and data analysis.

Qualitative Research

Having outlined my research question, it is necessary to justify my use of qualitative research methods for this investigation. In much of the social science literature, qualitative and quantitative methods are described in parallel as two independent spheres of empirical research (Flick et al. 2000, 8). Although in some debates both research directions deny each other any scientific legitimacy (Flick et al. 2000, 9), qualitative and quantitative have their uses in different circumstances and can at times be integrated (Flick et al. 2000, 173). However it should not be forgotten that the two approaches do differ from each other on essential points (Flick et al. 2000, 8). In general terms, quantitative data seeks to 'quantify the variation in a phenomenon, situation, problem or issue' (Kumar 2011, 13). Its purpose is to test and predict a hypothesis, rather than to explore a phenomenon. It relies on a high degree of standardization in its data collection (Flick et al. 2000, 9). Its 'cause and effect' approach is arguably more suited to a study of the natural sciences.

Qualitative data lends itself better for the study of human behaviour and the formulation of theories from data. Social science, unlike the sciences that study various aspects of the natural world, has its roots in the fundamental question of how humans understand other humans. This involves the researcher analysing the meanings and intentions of unpredictable human subjects (McCutcheon, 1999, 3). An 'open' 'more involved' and 'flexible' approach is needed (Flick et al. 2000, 5). Arksey and Knight explain: 'this [qualitative] approach draws attention to the differences and particularities in human affairs and prompts the social scientist to discover what people think, what happens, and why' (Arksey and Knight, 1999, 10).

My research focuses on Muslim women writers and their reasons for writing memoirs. These women are creative thinkers whose thoughts and expressions may be restricted by quantitative methods. Moreover, this topic aims to explore and

explain the beliefs and opinions of its subjects through interviews, assuming that ‘reality is created interactively and becomes meaningful subjectively, and that it is transmitted and becomes effective by collective and individual instances of interpretation’ (Flick et al. 2000, 7). Theory is generated from the interview data. The data is rich and thick in description. For this reason qualitative research is not concerned with having large samples. Although the small sample of my study means that I cannot generalise my findings, it is not the intention of my research to generalise. Rather I aim to provide detailed excerpts into the viewpoints of my three participants, which may supplement further research and fill a ‘gap’ in the existing area of knowledge of British Muslim writers. Although quantitative methods have their uses in terms of their ability to generalise findings, the very ‘richness’ of the data produced in my interviews give an insight into the beliefs and attitudes of British Muslim female writers with a depth that could not be achieved through standardized methods.

Interviews

Broadly speaking, the approaches to collecting data in qualitative investigation can be divided into two categories: the first focuses on naturally occurring data and the second on the generation of data through the interventions of research, such as interviewing (Richie and Lewis, 2003, 34). Whilst the former is better used in participant observation to observe behaviours in natural settings, interviews are the most appropriate method for research where the insights, beliefs and interpretations of people’s experiences are needed (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003, 6). Interviews can be considered as special forms of conversation, which vary from highly structured surveys to free-flowing informational exchanges (Silverman, 2004, 141). Due to the back and forth exchange of conversation and information between respondent and researcher, a common understanding is created, hence why interviews ‘construct’ data as opposed to ‘finding’ data (Miller and Dingwall 1997, 60). Data is rich and empirical, thus interviewing is the most commonly used method for conducting systematic social enquiry (Silverman, 2004, 140). With the exception of one interview, my interview questions allowed for a moderate free-flow of information through the semi-structured approach. I will briefly explain why semi-structured interviewing is my preferred choice.

My research question seeks to understand the intentions of Muslim women writers who happen to be ideological, are religiously motivated, share similar views and espouse religious positions as social activists. This includes exploring and analysing the meanings my interviewees attach to the topics under question. This means that a certain degree of flexibility is needed in the structure of the questions. The semi-structured approach allowed me to orient myself according to an interview guide, but with plenty of freedom of movement in the formulation and sequencing of questions (Flick et al. 2000, 204). In comparison, unstructured interviews allow the participant to converse freely through open ended questions which are related to the research topic but are guided almost entirely by the participant's conversation. The researcher is thus particularly careful to limit their control over the participant's responses. Structured interviews ask a fixed set of questions in sequential order with little or no manoeuvre for participants to talk beyond the topic. The intention of the interviewer is usually to test a hypothesis (Knight and Arksey 1999, 8). Semi-structured interviews combine the characteristics of both. They provide a general frame of reference whilst allowing the researcher to follow up interesting comments or themes made by the interviewees. They also enable the interviewer to guide the participant back to the topic if the conversation begins to veer significantly off.

Due to the nature of my research question, I did not approach the topic with rigid pre-formulated questions based on my own assumptions. My research seeks to formulate theory from data, and thus my questions are very general, focusing on the authors' intentions for writing, the topics covered in their books, their opinions of other authors' works and the importance they attach to the label 'Muslim writing.' When interesting points were raised by the authors, for example about the difficulties of the publishing process, I followed these up with additional questions. Essentially, the interviews were guided by the back and forth exchange of conversation between myself and the participants.

Interviewing

The purpose of this study is to analyse the ideas and opinions of three British Muslim writers in order to contribute to existing scholarly literature in the field of Muslim writing. As mentioned in the introduction, the data for this study was collected through interviews with three British Muslim female authors. I had initially planned to

interview two other writers but was unable to obtain access. Obtaining access to Naima B Robert and Shelina Zahra Janmohamed was achieved through the help of gatekeepers. Sarah Khan (the third writer in this study who has chosen to remain anonymous and who was previously known to me), provided me with access to Robert while my dissertation supervisor acted as a gatekeeper for Janmohamed. Without the help of these gatekeepers, access to both authors would have been very difficult. The importance of gatekeepers in this study can therefore not be understated. I certainly agree with the suggestion provided by Heath et al. that 'in the ''real world'' in which we conduct our research...researchers remain dependent on the goodwill of gate-keepers to a very large extent' (cited in Sanghera, 2008, 549). It is also true that gatekeepers are able to control the ways in which potential participants are informed about the study 'which may influence potential participants' willingness to participate' (Wiles 2005, cited in Sanghera, 2008, 549). From the email correspondence between Sarah Khan (henceforth referred to as Khan) and Robert,[7] I perceived that the relationship between them was friendly and informal. Khan made an effort to make my research project sound interesting. She emphasised that I was very interested in Robert's writing and in receiving a reply from her. This may have significantly influenced Robert's willingness to participate.

However, despite the help of gatekeepers for achieving access, obtaining replies from both authors proved to be difficult. This is somewhat unsurprising given the fact that they are successful authors who probably receive frequent requests for interviews. I therefore chose to interview Khan as a 'backup,' although there are several important reasons for this choice. The first is because she is well known to me, which is an advantageous factor in terms of rapport and ease of access. Secondly, Khan has written several successful non-fiction books for a mainstream readership, including two biographies. Moreover, she is connected to a spectrum of well-known Muslim writers and therefore likely to provide helpful information about their writing. Finally, and most importantly, she is in the process of collating ideas for a memoir, which she hopes to publish in the near future.

All three women had busy schedules and could not afford to spend a significant amount of time on the interviews. With the exception of Khan who agreed to be

[7] Khan forwarded the email correspondence to me, dated 14/05/13.

interviewed face-to-face, I opted to conduct the interviews via Skype. Due to webcam communication, Skype closely replicates a face-to-face interview but is arguably more convenient than a meeting because it eliminates the need to travel long distances for interviews. However, it has disadvantages in terms of observing body language, as usually only the participant's face is visible. Moreover Skype may be accessed in any environment where there is access to the internet. This could be a distracting environment such as the work place or in a house with young children. Participants may therefore not give their full attention to the interview. Despite these limitations, Skype appeared to be the best option of communication. Yet I soon found that obtaining a Skype interview with Robert was very difficult due to her busy schedule. After a couple of failed attempts, we agreed on a question and answer format via email. Although this method secured a response, it was not my preferred approach. This was because the email used selected questions based on my interview guide, inhibiting the exchange of conversation between us and limiting my ability to follow up any interesting points. Although I kept the questions as general as possible, the use of pre-formulated questions definitely had an effect on the depth of the data generated. The only advantage was that Robert offered to answer any more questions I had via subsequent emails, opening a path for on-going email conversation.

The second interview was a telephone interview with Janmohamed. Although Skype was suggested, a telephone interview appeared to be Janmohamed's preferred choice. Yet as Arksey and Knight express, 'telephone interviewing does not feel like interviewing' because the interviewer cannot see the respondent and therefore cannot see 'the visual cues that are so important in establishing an interviewing relationship' (Arksey and Knight, 1999, 79). Janmohamed was previously unknown to me hence establishing rapport was carried out through several introductory emails and the planning of an interview schedule. Generally however, good rapport during the interview with Janmohamed rested on my voice manner and the questions I asked (Arskey and Knight, 1999, 79). My inexperience in conducting telephone interviews, the sometimes unclear quality of the phone signal, and the disadvantage of being unable to interpret her body language meant that this interview was perhaps the most difficult of the three.

The final interview was carried out in a meeting in the writer's home. This was made possible because, as already mentioned, the writer, Khan, is known to me. The interview occurred in two parts which lasted over an hour each. This interview was perhaps the most flexible of the three in terms of structure due to the length of time that I had to conduct it. I was able to fully explore and probe Khan's ideas and opinions and the process was responsive to relevant spontaneous points brought up. Indeed the advantage of being known to Khan was that she was more willing to take out time from her schedule to talk to me; the informality between us meant that I could stop the interview when necessary, and resume it again easily. However, the disadvantage of this was that the interview produced detailed, long stories which at times were irrelevant. In the analysis of this interview I ended up leaving long passages un-coded. There was perhaps a higher degree of 'irrelevant' information than in the other interviews due to the fact that Khan is not a published memoir writer but a biographer and a children's non-fiction author. Her writing is therefore not entirely relevant to my topic. In general however, her interview produced some very interesting findings.

Analysis of Data and Ethical Issues

Following the interviews, the data was transcribed and coded. Unlike quantitative analysis, there are no clearly agreed rules or procedures for analysing qualitative data (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003, 200). However, as Flick et al. (2000) explains, the first stage is to read through the data in order to set up categories for analysis (Flick et al, 2000, 253). Following this, categories can be assembled into a guide for coding. Coding basically means 'relating particular passages in the text of an interview to one category, in the version that best fits these textual passages' (Flick et al, 2000, 255). I transcribed my interviews in full to avoid obscuring the full ideas that were expressed. If I had filtered through what I deemed to be 'irrelevant' data in the transcription of Khan's and Janmohamed's interviews, I risked missing information which may have been valuable. Moreover, as Ritchie and Lewis point out, the stage dedicated to analysis is not the end of analysis; 'the pathways to forming ideas to pursue…and theories to test begins right at the start of a research study and ends while writing up the results' (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003, 199).Transcribing in full ensured that I did not miss anything out which could deepen my understanding of the topic.

Following the transcription, I began the process of categorising firstly by allocating descriptions to the passages, ‘expressing data in the form of concepts’ (Flick, 2002, 177). When themes began to emerge, I colour coded and labelled them into categories and subsequently colour-coded passages in the text related to these themes. The process of categorising and coding was simultaneous—as I read and coded, new themes began to emerge in the text. However, I was careful not to superimpose the categories of one interview onto another. Overall, I opted for a thematic approach to analysing the data. My approach was inductive because it generated themes almost entirely from the data itself, avoiding superimposed interpretations based on my readings (Braun and Clarke 2006, 12). Additionally, I added notes related to the methodology of the interview which was useful for the reflexive section. For example, I noted down points where the recording was interrupted, when the participant was distracted, or when she stopped elaborating on a point she was making because ‘it was ‘not related to my research’ (Khan).

Finally, I must take into account the ethical considerations of the study. These included making sure that participants were aware of what the study was about and what they were required to do. Before participants gave their consent an introductory email was sent, explaining who I was and briefly outlining the aims of the research. If the participant agreed to take part, a detailed document was sent to them. This document, which had been read and approved by the relevant school at the University’s Ethics Monitoring Board, explained my research in more detail, including information on confidentiality. I ensured that the interviews, once recorded, were to be kept securely on a password protected computer and not shared with anyone. Alongside this document, a consent form was given to each participant informing them that they were free to withdraw at any time.

On the issue of anonymity, the nature of my research is problematic. Ensuring anonymity by changing the names of my participants would have been futile, as the study refers in detail to the contents of their books. As Smith explains, ‘the act of writing the autobiography or memoir is a very literal process of naming oneself’ (Smith, 2011, online). Anonymity is only possible for Khan because she is not a published memoir writer. As she has requested to be kept anonymous, I have not revealed too much detail about her published works.

According to Guenther (2009), standard practice and recommendations set by professional associations in social science dictate that researchers should protect the identities of individual participants (Guenther, 2009, 416). However, it is generally acceptable for researchers to use the real names of respondents when respondents are public officials (Guenther, 2009, 411). The women in this study are 'public officials' in the sense that they are mainstream authors, bloggers and journalists. Janmohamed and Robert have also made appearances on television.[8] Anonymity was therefore not a concern for them and they certainly did not express any interest in being kept anonymous. Guenther reasons that the act of naming is in fact an act of power. Participants may often *want* to be heard, particularly if they are social activists (Guenther, 2009, 412). As my findings will reveal, Janmohamed and Robert regard their memoirs as important expressions of social activism. As self-defined activists, they are willing to be named in order to assert their voices. Guenther explains that sometimes, the renaming of participants through the use of pseudonyms denies them the basic right to be who they are (Guenther, 2009, 414).

However, not using pseudonyms can result in some ethical dilemmas for the researcher. Criticism of participants' comments, beliefs and behaviours may be upsetting or embarrassing for them, and may compromise their reputations in the eyes of other readers. Researchers therefore have to be sensitive and careful in the way they relate their findings and criticisms. Indeed in this study, I have tried to be sensitive in the presentation of my findings and in criticisms of my participants' responses. However, the general disadvantage of doing this is that it potentially undermines the analytic rigor of the research findings. As Guenther explains:

> As we [researchers] work to present our research in such a way that it is unlikely to injure named respondents…without the seeming protection of pseudonyms, [we] may be more likely to censor their evidence at the expense of making convincing, nuanced arguments (Guenther, 2009, 414).

[8] Janmohamed writes on her blog, Spirit21 and has written for several newspapers and magazines, including The Guardian, The National, Huffington Post and Muslim Lifestyle magazine Emel. She has also appeared on Sky News, CNN and BBC. Robert is the editor of SISTERS magazine and has published several fiction books for teenagers.

SECTION TWO

REFLECTION ON INTERVIEW PROCESS

Before presenting my findings, a degree of reflexivity is needed to evaluate how the data may have been effected by the interview process. My positionality as a female Muslim researcher and a friend of one of the participants (Khan) may have significantly influenced the interview process. I wish to begin this section by briefly outlining the significance of terms such as 'positionality,' 'insider' and 'outsider.'

'Positionality' is a term used by Haw (1996) to describe the relationship between the researcher and participant. It specifically looks at how aspects of the researcher's identity can influence the interview process. The term describes the shifting ways that a person can be both an 'insider' and 'outsider.' Traditionally, being an 'outsider' has been thought of as a superior position from which to study communities. This is due to positivist epistemological theory which is based on the notion of an 'objective truth' existing in the field to be collected by an unbiased, neutral researcher. In recent academic writings, scholars have listed some of the advantages of being an 'outsider.' These include the impartiality of the researcher to their subjects, and the reduced risk of bias (Egharevba, 2001, 230). In studies of Muslim groups or communities, it is clear to see how the perspective of an outsider is advantageous. Over-familiarity with participants can be a problem, as it can lead to the blunting of broader and unbiased perspectives. For example, when researching Muslim girls in state and private schools, Haw (1996) expresses the problems with over-familiarity:

> Research is nothing without criticality. In the state school my criticality was blunted by my familiarity and consequent assumptions (Haw, 1996, 322).

However, since then, the field of ethnographic studies has undergone a shift in thinking which now considers 'insiderness' as a superior position to conduct research (Egharevba 2001, 230). This is because those who study their own communities are less likely to misrepresent them and render them pathological, as 'White' researchers have done in the past (Egharevba 2001, 230). Moreover, the shared cultural values of a researcher and participant may provide unique perspectives that cannot be perceived by an outsider (Labaree, 2002, 99). Additionally, when

researching a cultural or ‘religious’ group, the shared background of the participant and researcher reduces the need for preliminary negotiation to gain access to the community. This is particularly important in research among South-Asian Muslim women as they tend to be a difficult group to access (Egharevba, 2001, 231).

However, these advantages do come with challenges. Being ‘too close’ to participants in terms of shared culture or religion can potentially diminish the broader and unbiased perspective that an outsider can bring (Labaree, 2002, 106). Access can also be problematic, as Bolognani (2007) discovered. She notes that between 2001 and 2005, the climate of Islamophobia led to paranoia about research on Muslims, meaning that even Pakistani researchers were refused interviews by Pakistani Muslims (Bolognani, 2007, 281). Moreover, whilst ‘privileged access’ into a community can help secure trust, being too close to the community can also be problematic. Participants may feel uneasy about disclosing certain information out of apprehension that the researcher may expose it to other community members.

These concerns draw attention to the fact that the positivist notions of insider-outsider relations are too simplistic. They polarize the researcher and ignore the fluidity of the researcher’s identity (Labaree, 2002, 100). ‘Positionality’ is therefore a better term for describing the relationship between researcher and participant. This term refers to the ‘fragmentation and the fluid and shifting nature’ of identity categories (Haw, 1996, 320) and therefore the multiple ways that the researcher can be an ‘insider’ and ‘outsider.’ It places heavy emphasis on the biography of the researcher. This means that while the researcher can share the same religious and cultural background as the participant, they may differ with regards to class, education, or religious 'school of thought', all of which can have an impact on the research process.

There are many factors of my own ‘biography’ which are likely to have influenced the research process, including the preliminary negotiations for access. Generally, writers are not an easy group to access. They are likely to receive frequent requests for interviews by those in the media as well as those in academia which puts them in a position to privilege certain requests over others. Thus, as previously mentioned, gatekeepers are extremely important. Without the help of my dissertation supervisor who acted as a gatekeeper for Janmohamed, and Khan who acted as a gatekeeper

for Robert, I would have been unlikely to access the authors. Despite this, there were initial challenges in fixing a date and time for a meeting with Robert. This was due to Robert's busy schedule which meant that as a researcher, my interview was unsurprisingly ascribed a lower priority. As a result of this, the type of interview that was eventually conducted has significantly compromised the depth of my research. Egharevba explains that this is a reoccurring problem in research. In most situations, interviews are of a lower priority to the lives of the participants than they are to the lives of the researchers, especially for those participants who fall under the category of 'elite' (Egharevba, 2000, 231).[9]

However, Mikecz (2012) reflects that knowledge of the interviewee's background, including their willingness to contribute to academic research, can help in gaining access (Mikecz, 2012, 482). This may explain why it was easier to obtain an interview with Janmohamed. Given the recent success of her memoir and her busy career, I was surprised at her readiness to be interviewed, as well as her helpfulness in the process. For example, when unable to do the interview on the date requested, she promptly sent me an email apologising and asked to change the date. Here I would like to point out a line from my introductory email which may explain her helpfulness:

> Your book, *Love in a Headscarf* is of particular interest to me, and I would very much appreciate the opportunity to interview you about your writing and your decisions to write. This is quite an under-researched area so your contribution would be very valuable.[10]

In relation to Mikecz's observation, my email is likely to have elicited a positive reply because Janmohamed is herself interested in scholarship about Muslim writing.[11] Moreover, as a self-proclaimed social activist, she may have considered the interview to be important, and therefore given it higher priority.

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[9] Rice (2009) and Mikecz (2012) acknowledge that 'elites' are a difficult group to define. Rice accepts that elites 'cannot be neatly defined as a homogenous group' but is not entirely opposed to the use of the term 'to give some meaning to those who can best answer particular research questions.' He uses Hornby et al.'s definition of elites as 'a group in society considered to be superior because of the power, talent, privileges etc. of its members' (Rice, 2009, 71). As a successful published memoir authors, journalists and editors, Janmohamed and Robert can be considered 'elite.'

[10] Introductory email to Janmohamed, sent 15/05/13

[11] See for example her interview with Claire Chambers: http://www.spirit21.co.uk/2011/10/book-launch-british-muslim-fictions/

With all interviews, it is reasonable to assume that previous knowledge of the researcher will result in more trust and therefore elicit fuller responses from the participants. This was certainly the case with Khan. Not only was I granted privileged access into the life of a busy author, mother and student, but I was also able to obtain a very rich interview. However, over familiarity also proved to be problematic in many respects. For example, outside of the interview context, Khan was already aware of the nature of my research as I had talked to her about it on several occasions before deciding to interview her. This meant that in the interview she often stopped elaborating on a certain point she was making, commenting: 'this is not relevant.' Although I did encourage her to keep talking, her prior knowledge of my research topic could have curtailed some interesting insights into topics which were not directly related but nevertheless important. Moreover, there were certainly times in the interview when our mutual agreement on certain topics prevented me from questioning her further when it would have been beneficial to do so. One example is our disapproval over a certain book about forced marriages. It was only upon transcribing her interview that I realised her comments about this book held a myriad of assumptions which could have proved interesting if I had probed them further. Therefore, the most difficult part of being familiar with a participant is to remain critical and unbiased, particularly when the researcher and participant share many similar views.

On the other hand, the quick establishment of trust and rapport between Janmohamed and me was surprising given the fact that we are unknown to each other. Here aspects of my biography may have been important, particularly my religious beliefs, gender and interest in writing. As a Muslim woman researching Muslim women writers, I may have been positioned as a 'confidante,' and a 'non-threatening outsider.' Although being a Muslim is not enough to secure trust, our connection on a social networking site could have proved beneficial. Through this site, Janmohamed had the opportunity to access additional information about me, including my dress, my interests, the 'groups' I am part of, the organisations I have volunteered for as well as some of the websites I have written articles for (including a Blog site where we have both posted articles). Had this information pointed out any similarities, it may have helped to facilitate trust. On one or two occasions in the interview I certainly felt that Janmohamed knew more about me than I had revealed

in my introductory email. In general, this indicates the potential benefits of using social networking sites for gaining trust and rapport.

Indeed, participants can choose to disclose or conceal information depending on how they 'read' the interviewer and position them. Thus where possible, the reflexive scholar learns how to adapt their 'biographies' to elicit data. Although I was aware that Janmohamed had access to information about me via social networking sites, in the interview I was open about my opinions of certain Muslim writers and demonstrated a lot of background knowledge about her memoir. In response, she appeared to reply to questions frankly, providing information which surprised me, such as her discontent at the marketing of her memoir as a 'chick-lit.' Moreover, she suggested other Muslim writers whom she believed I would benefit from interviewing, including Leila Aboulela whom she considers 'one of the most high profile Muslim writers in Britain.' In general her tone was friendly, and she emphasised her willingness at the end of the interview to answer any more questions by email if necessary. This was extremely encouraging as I was nervous during my interview with her.

Perhaps the most vexing issue of the research process is the sensitivity of representation. 'Responsibility to the community' means that any false representations, 'either real or perceived,' can cause participants to feel betrayed. Although I have argued that notions of 'insiderness' are too simplistic in reflexive accounts, I certainly share many characteristics with the authors in this study, including religious beliefs, an interest in literature, commitment to social activism, and to some extent, ideology. In this way, the burden of 'responsibility' in representation is particularly incumbent upon me. This is perpetuated by the fact that the authors' own writings are preoccupied with challenging negative representations of Muslims and Islam. To present the authors in ways which may appear critical or negative would seem insensitive and disloyal. Moreover, issues of sensitivity are problematized by the very fact that the women are memoir writers. Unlike fiction writing where the author can distance themselves from their 'creations,' the memoir is a 'deliberate act' of naming and identifying oneself (Smith, 2011, online). Criticism of a memoir could therefore be interpreted as criticism of the author.

However, in seeking to find a solution to this problem, I can turn to Abbas (2010) who cautions researchers not to not let personal subjectivities get in the way of the objectivity of the research process (Abbas, 2010, 123). In other words, the personal beliefs of both interviewer and participant should not be regarded as more significant than the objective nature of the research methods and the description of results. This means that as a researcher, I must devote myself entirely to relating the findings truthfully. By being honest with my participants about the nature of my research, I have conducted this study without necessarily upsetting them. Moreover, by practicing self-disclosure with my participants (although this was somewhat limited in the email exchange between myself and Robert), they have been able to position me and consequently decide what information to reveal or conceal (Abbas, 2010, 125). Therefore, no information that the writers did not wish to reveal to me has been revealed. Effectively, as this reflexive section has aimed to show, both researcher and participant have been central to the making of meaning in this study, as is the central aim of all qualitative social science study.

SECTION THREE

FINDINGS

The interviews covered a number of themes. Due to the word constraints of this study, I have not been able to present all the themes but have included those which I felt were the most relevant and interesting in the context of my research questions stated in the introductory section of this dissertation. The interview questions examined the women's reasons for writing in the textual genre of memoir as well as their ideas and opinions about 'Muslim writing' in general. Due to the fact that Sarah Khan (henceforth referred to ask Khan) is not yet a published memoir writer, this section focuses primarily on Robert and Janmohamed, drawing on Khan's comments where relevant. Before analysing the writers' own comments, I wish to briefly introduce the main themes and topics of their memoirs. This will help contextualise the findings.

The Memoirs

According to Cohen (2012), 'the memoir is a narrative essay, organized around a single theme, topic or situation which uses selective aspects of the life history, often combined with other material, to explore it in depth' (Cohen, 2012, 179). When taken in this way, all memoir writing has a specific objective. Robert's memoir, *From My Sisters' Lips,* details the story of her conversion to Islam from an 'average, middle-class South African teenager' to a devout Muslim woman adopting the Islamic head scarf (*hijab*) and face veil (*niqab*) (Robert, 2005, 20). She explains her reasons for converting to Islam, describes the 'joys and triumphs' of being a Muslim as well as the problems and challenges. Aware of the 'misconceptions' ascribed to converts like her, she interpolates the narrative with stories of other Muslim converts to emphasise their heterogeneity. These women are from different ethnic, economic and educational backgrounds. Robert's work intends to show that they are not 'brainwashed' into Islam or urged by partners to convert, as stereotypes would suggest (Roberts, 2005, 56). Describing her memoir as a 'celebration of Islam,' she constantly interjects her text with reference to 'Islamic fundamentals' and Islamic guidelines.

Janmohamed's memoir is also organised around a single theme as established in its title and subtitle: *Love in a Headscarf: Muslim Woman seeks the One*. The memoir, which has been described as 'part memoir part chick-lit' (The Guardian, 2009, online), describes Janmohamed's attempt to 'fall in love' and find a suitable marriage partner. The first chapter opens with a meeting between Janmohamed and a suitor and as the narrative progresses many more suitors enter the pages and leave. In fitting with the chick-lit tradition, the anecdotes are comical and the general tone of the narrative is light-hearted, to the extent that Janmohamed has even been described as 'the Muslim Bridget Jones' (Illume Magazine, Sep 13th 2010, online). However like Robert, she has other preoccupations, which include redefining crucial events for her readers and deconstructing stereotypes. Thus, she lends an entire chapter to discussing the negative repercussions of 9/11 on British Muslim women. When asked about the relevance of this chapter to her book, Janmohamed comments:

> it's very slightly off kilter with the theme of the book…but I was writing a book and I had an opportunity with the reader who's hopefully become my friend at that point to say well actually, this is what it was like, and this is what it felt like (Janmohamed).

Describing her memoir to be more than a story of romance, she frequently interjects the narrative with explications of the Islamic faith. The central theme of love is therefore a vehicle for discussing religion, for redefining 'misconceptions,' and for promoting tenets of the Islamic faith. The latter example can be perceived in many instances in the book, including in an early chapter which elevates the benefits of the five daily prayers through a lengthy and lyrical description:

> In an urban lifestyle, the prayers created a much-needed sensitivity to nature's rhythms. 'The day was created for work,' says the Qur'an, 'and the night was created for rest…' (Janmohamed, 2009, 89).

Promoting Islam: Ideological Narratives

Chambers' research has revealed the heterogeneity of individuals who fall under the category 'Muslim writers.' Among this spectrum are those who write with common religious purposes as well as those who write from secular points of view.

The fact that Muslim writing is inclusive of multiple perspectives suggests that it is a broad generic category. In critical literature theory, a useful way of understanding generic categories is to return to Wittgenstein's theory of family resemblance (Fishelov, 1991, 123). Fishelov explains that 'representations of a genre may be regarded as malting up a family whose individual members are related in various ways, without necessarily having any single feature shared in common by all' (Fowler, cited in Fishelov, 1991, 123). Within Muslim writing, Chambers observes that despite the 'lively differences of opinions' between Muslim authors, there are certain 'shared tropes' which reoccur, providing proof that their work forms a 'unique generic category' in modern English literature (Chambers, 2011, 27). Such 'tropes' include Palestine, Afghanistan, the 'War on Terror,' gender, racism, class and language. Although there is certainly a correlation between the nationality of the writers and the topics they write about (for example, Palestine is most frequently referred to by Arab writers) political issues like Palestine and Afghanistan are also evoked by writers of non-Arab heritage (Chambers, 2011, 27). Thus, despite differences in nationality, Muslim writers share similar political concerns. This suggests the importance of global politics in understanding Muslim identity.

However, it is worth drawing attention to the significance Ahmad and Evergeti place on 'Muslim' as 'a complex and contested construction…often competing with other identifications' (Ahmad and Evergeti, 2010, 1725). Thus there is inevitably as much heterogeneity within the generic category of Muslim writing as there are between Muslim writers. In this study, the writers self-identify as 'religious Muslims.' In her article *Reading Islam in the West,* Phillips (2012) argues that the main preoccupations of 'religious' Muslim writers are ideological. In seeking to deconstruct the stereotypes that prevail in Western television, film and media, and elevating the values of Islam above Western modes of living, the intention of these authors is to persuade their readers of the 'correctness' of a particular way of interpreting the world' (Phillips, 2012, 66). Phillips understands 'Religious Muslims' as those whose religious identity transcends other aspects of identity. She quotes the example of author Leila Aboulela, who explains:

> I am interested in going deep, not just looking at 'Muslim' as a cultural or political identity but something close to the centre, something that transcends

> but doesn't deny gender, nationality, class and race' (Aboulela, cited in Phillips, 2012, 67).

The writers of this study express similar sentiments with regards to their religious identity. In her writing, Robert conflates the idea of a 'higher purpose' with a religious purpose, explaining: there is a 'sense of purpose or mission, of not wanting to write 'just to write,' but for one's writing to serve a higher purpose.' As has been shown in the previous section, both Robert and Janmohamed's texts are concerned with deconstructing the prevalent stereotypes of Islam and Muslims; in particular Muslim women. Robert opens *From My Sisters' Lips* with an image of a veiled woman on 'western city streets, covered from head to toe, rarely fail[ing] to provoke a strong reaction' (Robert, 2005, 15). She follows this with a description of what she believes are the common stereotypes of women with head scarves and face veils:

> Forced…to dress as she does…uneducated…steeped in ignorance, yet to experience the delights of Western freedoms, desperate to be liberated' (Roberts, 2005, 15).

She challenges readers to:

> See beyond the exterior, beyond the veil…see for yourself in what ways you are alike and what ways you are different (Robert, 2006, 16).

Her attempt to 'challenge' readers is presented through her effort of demonstrating Islam as 'corrective' to Western modes of living. In many instances in the memoir, she draws upon Islamic values and teachings, elevating these above secular values. Perhaps the most interesting example of this is a reflection on polygamy half way through the narrative. She writes:

> It has often occurred to me that the polygamous system is one that is ideally suited to a certain type of woman: the woman who is busy with her studies or career, whose friends and family play a big part in her life, the woman with children from a previous relationship….(Robert, 2006, 283).

In the remainder of the narrative similar observations are made with regard to the universal themes of motherhood, sisterhood and marriage. 'Islamic values' are drawn upon, contrasted to, and elevated above 'secular values.' In her attempt to

persuade readers of the 'correctness' of this particular way of interpreting the world, Robert's memoir is overtly ideological (Phillips, 2012, 67). By the end of the book, she hopes to have challenge[d] readers' preconceptions of what it means to be a Muslim woman, and ultimately enlightened her readers about the benefits of the 'Islamic' way of life (Roberts, 2006, 15).

The ideological intentions of Janmohamed's memoir are less obvious, but are apparent in the comments made in the interview. Janmohamed appears somewhat ambivalent about her publisher's marketing of the memoir as a chick-lit, commenting: 'this is not the kind of author I am, that's certainly not the kind of author I was at the time.' She describes her memoir to be 'more than a story of romance.' It is concerned with providing a 'Muslim woman's viewpoint' on crucial issues such women's rights, arranged marriages and the hijab. Like Robert's memoir, it often elevates aspects of the Islamic faith above secular values, such as in the aforementioned description of prayer.

According to Phillips, ideological narratives have a bad reputation. This is because aspects of the worldview they promote may 'offend the sensibilities of its intended audience' (Phillips, 2012, 68). For example, Robert's memoir challenges contemporary Western gender roles by promoting ideas that are considered outdated or even incompatible to Western modes of living. These include arranged marriages, polygamy and traditional notions of child rearing and domesticity. Moreover, Phillips argues that religious narratives have long been regarded as artistically invalid by literary establishments because of their obvious endorsement of religious ideas and values (Phillips, 2012, 68). Following the work of Roland Barthes and the 'spirit of postmodernism,' contemporary literary theory has tended to esteem texts where meaning is open and plural as artistically superior to conventionally realist works (Phillips, 2012, 68). Thus, criticisms of Janmohamed's book have included comments about it being 'monological' and 'preachy' (something readers do not expect from a book marketed as a chick-lit) and Robert's book has been described as 'too narrative and basic' (Amazon Reviews, online).

Writing Back: Challenging Islamophobia

> As Muslims in Britain, many fictions are being written about us. Many are presented as fact. The Muslim label already looms large in the cultural imagination…so we should write back (Robin-Yasin Kassab, 2009, online).

Research by Nash, Morey and Yaqin and Petley and Richardson supplements our understanding about representations of Muslim identity in Britain. By examining the ways that Muslim identity is represented in media, fiction and nonfiction, and political discourse, their research has arrived at some of the following conclusions:

> The dominant view in the UK media is that there is no common ground between the West and Islam, and that the conflict between them is accordingly inevitable. Muslims in Britain are depicted as a threat to traditional British customs, values and ways of life (Petley and Richardson, 2011, xi).

> Charges of fanaticism, obscurantism and violence are laid at the feet of Islam…in the family Muslim male chauvinism visits violence upon Muslim women and prohibits individuation…repressed sexuality impacts upon the authoritarian politics of Muslim states....The only hope for Muslims is migration from the Muslim world to the West, and complete conversion of the freedoms on offer there (Nash, 2012, 117).

> Whether the controversy is over veiling, cartoons of the prophet Muhammad…Muslims appear always a problematic presence, troubling those values of individualism and freedom said to define Western nations. Such images are distorted abstractions…they paint Muslims as a homogenous, Zombie-like body, incapable of independent thought (Morey and Yaqin, 2011, 1).

Thus representations of Muslims in English writing are often deeply problematic, drawing on narrow meanings, stereotypes and misconstrued depictions. Nash identifies that these representations have traditionally been fixated on the stereotype of the Muslim Other. This is the epitome of Edward Said's research, Orientalism (1979), which argues that:

> The European encounter with the Orient, and specifically with Islam, strengthened [the] system of representing the Orient and […] turned Islam into the very epitome of an outsider against which the whole of European civilizations from the Middle Ages was founded (cited in Chambers, 2011, 12).

Orientalist assumptions about Muslims and Islam have been prevalent for many decades in the scholarship of Western Orientalists and through early depictions provided by artists, journalists and travellers (Nash, 2012, 117). Nash argues that today Orientalism has been 'absorbed' into Western discourse and has particularly been expressed in the aftermath of the 'War on Terror' (Nash, 2012, 117). In this way, it has come to form a master narrative about Muslims in Britain.

Master narratives are narratives which are dominant in the cultural imagination. They are usually archetypal, consisting of stock plots and readily recognisable character types (Nelson, 2001, 6). They can be used to justify how we think and how we behave (Nelson, 2001, 6). According to Petley and Richardson (2011), the 'otherising' and orientalising of Muslims has led to the rise in Islamophobic behaviour in the British public. Some of the manifestations of Islamophobia include hostility and negativity in the media and blogosphere, in the publications of certain think tanks, in the speeches and policy proposals of certain political leaders, in hate crimes on the streets and in employment practices (Petley and Richardson, 2011, 12).

In the interviews with the three authors in this study, Islamophobia was one of the lengthiest topics of discussion. When asked their opinions about representations of Muslim in literature, all three women expressed frustration at the ways Muslims are portrayed in media and popular literature, drawing on examples like the ones mentioned above. Interestingly the term 'Islamophobia' was not used more than once although it was frequently alluded to. Its non-use can perhaps be understood through an analysis of its controversial definition. 'Islamophobia' is defined by the Runneymede Trust as 'unfounded hostility towards Islam, and therefore fear or dislike of all or most Muslims' (cited in Afshar, 2008, 4). In 1997, the Runneymede Trust established a commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia in response to the intensifying 'anti Muslimism' following the Rushdie Affair (Allen, 2005, 73). However its definition has been criticised by those in the media who argue that the word acts to silence critique of Islam and Muslims. Thus, in the publications of international organisations, such as the European Union and the Council of Europe, as well as in the British press, the term 'Islamophobia' sometimes appears in inverted commas; as if to imply that the meaning is unfixed, unclear, or not as clear as others claim (Petley and Richardson, 2011, 5).

Much of the scepticism could be due to the lexicon. The term ‘Islamophobia’ is misleading because ‘phobia’ implies an irrational fear of something. Those accused of Islamophobia may argue that their criticism of Islam does not stem from irrational fears but from a justified critique of the religion. Consequently the term has a stifling effect on debate. These arguments demonstrate that the term ‘Islamophobia’ is becoming discredited and therefore losing its acceptability and emotional power in debates. Perhaps for these reasons, the participants refrained from using it. Instead, they employed the words ‘Orientalism’ ‘hostility’ and ‘negative stereotyping’ as substitutes. It can be argued however that these terms contribute to a broad definition of Islamophobia which encompasses multi-layered and complex discourses of rejection, fear, hostility, hate and ‘Othering’ of Muslims.

When commenting on the ‘Othering' of Muslims in the media and in literature, all three writers expressed annoyance at the book industry’s apparent favouring of ‘Orientalist’ narratives. Khan comments:

> Muslims are the most negative subjects globally…they can try and change that by writing their memoirs, put their human face on things…but in trying to do that they’re not going to get picked up easily…agents would rather have, you know, the Orientalist narrative, just looking at the themes of oppression, forced marriages, polygamy, all the negative things.

The writers’ memoirs are attempts to ‘write back’ to this tradition and tell ‘another side of the story’ (Robert). Thus, in her opening chapter, Janmohamed provides readers with this explication:

> Stories like mine remain unheard, as they do not fit neatly with prevailing stereotypes which tells tales of oppression or of those rejecting Islam. Nonetheless, such stories are just as crucial to our understanding of what it means to be a Muslim woman. Not every Muslim woman is subjected to a forced marriage, kidnapping or imprisonment. We are not one-dimensional creatures hidden beneath black veils (Janmohammed, 2009, xiii).

Moreover, Robert complains:

> The myriad book titles ranging from *Behind the Veil, Beyond the Veil* and *Beneath the Veil* to *Lifting the Veil, Tearing the Veil* and *Rage against the Veil*

> convey [an] Orientalist sense of exoticism and titillation that is for removed from our own image of the niqab (Robert, 2006, 192).

Thus, when reflecting over her main motivation for writing, she comments:

> I was keen to dispel some of the widely held misconceptions about Muslim women, in particular converts and women who wear the niqab. I knew that our story was different to the story of subjugation, oppression and exploitation that was constantly being told in the books on the shelves of mainstream bookshops and I wanted to share that (Robert).

In seeking to challenge Orientalist representations of Muslims and readdress the negativity attributed to Islam, Robert, Janmohamed and Khan attempt to redefine and refashion their identities in ways that they deem to be more positive. Collectively, their narratives form counter stories. Counter stories are narratives that resist oppressive identities and attempt to replace it with ones that command respect (Nelson, 2001, 6). Nelson describes two functions of the counter story. The first is to identify the fragments which form the construction of the oppressive identity (in this case, the tropes of Orientalism), the second is to retell the story in a way so 'as to make visible the morally relevant details that the master narratives have suppressed' (Nelson, 2001, p7). If this 'retelling' is successful, 'the group members will stand revealed as respect-worthy moral agents' (Nelson, 2001, 7). According to Chambers, counter stories have come to form a key trope in Muslim writing (Chambers, 2011, 26).

However, an interesting issue arises when Muslim authors appear to criticise Islam from within. Nash identifies that 'the dialectic of literary discourse will be critical (at times severely critical) of its cultural roots while remaining committed to them' (Nash, 2012, 6). But when writers 'attack Muslims from the inside' using the identified tropes of Orientalism in representations of their community (Nash, 2012, 6), they can be considered 'alien' to the [Muslim] view of itself' (Nash, 2012, 6). In the interviews, the writers express particular annoyance at female Muslim writers who portray Islam in negative ways, drawing on the themes of oppression, misogyny, backwardness and cruelty. They explain that their own memoirs are attempts to write back to this tradition. Commonly dubbed the 'misery memoir,' these narratives portray 'the Arab /Muslim woman escaping from the oppressive patriarchy of her

native culture to freedom and independence in the West' (Hassan, 2008, online). According to Fitzpatrick (2009), such narratives 'take up previous Orientalist assumptions about the Middle East and Muslims,' giving these assumptions 'rejuvenated force' through the authorship of 'natives or near natives' (Fitzpatrick, 2009, 244).

Indeed, recent scholarship has analysed some of the controversies of the 'misery memoir.' Fitzpatrick (2009) argues that 'misery memoirs' are written to fulfil Western political agendas. Focusing on American foreign policy, he reasons that the narratives have successfully promoted and reinforced stereotypes of Muslims which limit the kind of understanding Western readers have of Muslim societies. The portrayal of the Muslim world as 'holding values completely antithetical to what are seen as American values helps to explain why Americans come to see the overthrow of [Muslim] regimes as a moral obligation' (Fitzpatrick, 2009, 247). In particular, Muslim women and Muslim women's dress become prime symbols of antithetical values, being singled out as 'markers of 'backwardness and fearful subordination' (Afshar, 2008, 414). In these narratives, Muslim women are portrayed as desperately in need of Western liberation from 'the chains imposed on them by their faith' (Afshar, 2008, 420).

Fitzpatrick's argument is convincing, but it draws on narratives as diverse as Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Asne Seierstad's *The Bookseller of Kabul*, Jean Sasson's *Mayada, Daughter of Iraq*, and de Bellaigue's *In the Rose Garden of the Martyrs* without paying attention to the differences in the historical, cultural, and political environments that each text was produced. Similarly, Khan and Janmohamed homogenise these narratives together on the basis of their perceived negativity of Islamic values and Muslims. The problem with this homogenisation is that it produces essentialist interpretations on the part of the three authors themselves. This attitude is perhaps unsurprising given the fact that the women are ideological authors who adopt a political stance that accepts no criticism of Islam. Yet both Khan and Janmohamed seek to undermine the arguments of 'misery memoir' authors by separating religion and culture into separate categories and blaming 'culture' for the vices described. For example, in the introduction of her memoir, Janmohamed writes:

> Muslim women have many stories to tell. Some of these are horrific. The suffering, oppression and abuse that some women face in the name of religion, but which in reality is driven by culture and power, must never be forgotten and has to be stopped. I feel a double distress, sharing their pain as sisters in faith but also seeing the beauty of my religion misappropriated, misrepresented and abused to serve inhumane ends (Janmohamed, 2009, xiii).

Similarly, Khan comments:

> 'I remember literature of that sort coming out, it was by Muslim women…where they were saying look what's happened to me it's so awful, this is what Arab culture is like….I think those got into the market a lot more because they fill a certain agenda… they would mix a lot of cultural practices with Islam. It was quite frustrating on a large scale, you know, quite Orientalist, quite reductionist, just looking at the themes of oppression forced marriages, polygamy, all the negative things.'

In trying to separate culture and religion, Janmohamed and Khan attempt to deflect blame away from religion and ignore the inclusively interactive nature of Islam and 'culture' (Duderija, 2010, 128). By describing culture and religion as conflicting categories, their understanding of 'Muslim writing' is problematic. While Chambers emphasises the inclusion of 'authors from different cultures, nationalities, political and religious positions' (Chambers, 2011, 268) into the category, the writers here appear to favour a definition of 'Muslim' which is far narrower and which would therefore exclude a number of authors which Chambers includes (Chambers, 2011, 19). This will be explored further in the sub-section entitled 'Muslim Writing and Muslim Writers.'

Writing, Da'wah and Social Activism

To begin this section, I would like to draw attention to a comment by Robert:

> I am profoundly grateful that Allah chose me to convey the message through this book. I think it is definitely the most popular of all my books - and deservedly so, in my opinion. I wrote it for Allah's Sake and He has blessed it thus far (Robert).

This comment sheds light on one of the key motivating factors behind the production of the women's memoirs: the Islamic invocation of *daw'ah*. Traditionally *daw'ah* has been understood as a 'religious outreach or mission to exhort people to embrace Islam as the true religion' (Kahani -Hopkins and Hopkins, 2002, 229). This is an activity which occurs separately from any practical political concerns (Kahnai-Hopkins and Hopkins, 2002, 229). However, in reference to her writing, Robert uses the terms *daw'ah* and social activism together, seemingly understanding their definitions to be symbiotic. Perhaps this can be explained by Kahnai-Hopkins and Hopkins' (2002) reinterpretation of the term, based on numerous interviews with British Muslims. They argue the traditional definition of *daw'ah* is limited; 'real' *daw'ah* demands that Islam be debated in public in a language which addresses ordinary people's everyday concerns (Kahnai-Hopkins and Hopkins 2002, 299). Therefore, the act of 'cleaning out the environment against drug dealing, against prostitution and so on' the 'taking care of deprived in society, the elderly, the weak, the rejected, the poor,' all of this can be considered *daw'ah* because these are inherently 'Islamic' concerns (Kahnai-Hopkins and Hopkins, 2002, 298). This definition seems to coincide with Robert's understanding of *daw'ah* as an outreach project oriented to the 'everyday concerns' of society. This, she argues, is constantly changing as socio-political contexts change. Thus, about her book she comments:

> [it] came out before the *niqab* bans, before the media storms about *Shari'ah,* before the rise of Islamophobia etc. I have changed, the sisters in the book itself have changed as the world has. A sequel is needed (Robert).

Janmohamed's memoir is also motivated by an Islamic sense of duty. However, rather than using the term *da'wah*, she prefers to describe her memoir as an expression of 'social activism.' According to Snyder and Omoto (2007), social activity is 'the expression of all the activities in which people act in ways that will benefit not only themselves as individuals, but also the larger communities of which they are members' (Marzana et al. 2003, 497). In this instance, 'larger communities' can be taken to refer to the British Muslim community and the wider British public in general. As ideological Muslims, the promotion of Islamic values is a key preoccupation for both Janmohamed and Khan, and hence they are vociferous about their roles as social activists. Janmohamed expresses concern at the lack of understanding about the Muslim community in wider British society, commenting that discussions are

often ‘polarised’ without seeming to explore the ‘shared experiences of being British and Muslim.’ Her memoir therefore aims to provide the ‘middle ground’ within this discussion, offering a voice which is both British and Muslim. By doing so, Janmohamed hopes to facilitate a better understanding of the Islamic faith to her non-Muslim British readership.

For Khan, the desire to promote Islam to a non-Muslim British readership has its roots in the social activism movement of the Muslim community since the Rushdie Affair. According to Mazrui (1990), *The Satanic Verses* was a cause of social and cultural concern as Rushdie ‘subordinate[d] the real anguish of Muslim believers to the titillation of his Western readers’ (Mazrui, 1990, 136). Despite critics arguing for the freedom of the creative artist from any oppressive form of ideological suppression of the kind represented by fundamentalist Islam (Hannabuss and Allard, 1994, 25), *The Satanic Verses* raised important questions about the artistic responsibilities of writers. Mazrui argues that Rushdie elevated ‘the pleasure of art above the pain of society’ (Mazrui, 1990, 136). Indeed, many of Chambers’ respondents speak of the deep hurt felt by British Muslims following the publication of the book. Khan explains that women’s memoir writing began as a response to negativity about Islam in public and political discourse, in the aftermath of the *Satanic Verses* Affair. She comments:

> It was the first time we were put in the limelight in a big way. I think it awoke a lot of women as well to see what’s being written about us. As a community we were not used to—up to 89—seeing ourselves in the newspaper, ever. But the Rushdie Affair, followed soon after by the Gulf War, you had to start getting used to Muslims in the media (Khan).

She explains how the Affair had the effect of ‘awakening the whole community’ and giving rise to numerous forms of activity, including the process of ‘expression’ through the publications of magazines and books. She theorises this as a result of the stigmatisation of the Muslim community on the basis of their perceived ‘otherness.’ However Khan also explains that the Rushdie Affair had the surprising outcome of creating ‘positive’ interest in Islam:

> We were constantly defending ourselves, constantly explaining. People were looking at Islam, asking, ‘why are they so offended by what Salman Rushdie

> wrote? So by a lot more dialogue, a lot more discussion, in parallel there are a lot more converts. Not straight away…but the subject of Islam was a lot more public (Khan).

Thus the Rushdie Affair had the contrary effects of 'stigmatizing and alienating Muslims' on the one hand, and resulting in the 'rise of converts' on the other. Khan believes that the latter outcome is a result of Muslim activists' relentless challenging of the negative stigmatization of Islam in public and political discourse, thus resulting in 'a lot more dialogue, a lot more discussion.' The women's own memoirs can be considered important in this regard. Speaking of the negativity in the British literature and media about veiled Muslim women, she cites Robert's memoir as a positive example of challenging the 'status quo.'

Social Activism and Muslim Communities

In seeking to understand why the women have chosen the memoir as a textual form of expression, the significance of social activism within Muslim communities is particularly relevant. Returning to Snyder and Omoto's definition of social activity as the expression of activities which benefit individuals as well as communities, Smith (2011) argues that the memoir's effects are particularly beneficial for those who come from 'marginalised or dispossessed communities' due to the means of 'resistance and personal redefinition' it provides for both the writer and the reader (Smith, 2011, online). Much literature about Muslims in Britain suggests that British Muslims, predominantly from South Asian backgrounds, are among the most dispossessed communities in Britain. Economically, this is indicated by The Review of the Evidence Base on Faith Communities (2006) which reveals that 40% of Muslims live in deprived housing areas in economically stagnant towns. Many Muslims living in these conditions see themselves as victims of underfunding and government neglect (Akhtar, 2005, 169). Within this community, British Muslim women have traditionally been 'denied agency or power both within and outside the domestic sphere' (Gilliat-Ray, 2010, 210). They also remain politically underrepresented (Gilliat-Ray, 2010, 217). However, not all Muslim women can be defined in this way - certainly not the writers participating in this study. The fact that the women are successful published authors suggests that they are from privileged

backgrounds and thus quite different to the characteristics usually ascribed to Muslim women in Britain.

However, according to the authors, the Muslim woman's voice is 'entirely underrepresented in the mainstream book industry' (Khan). The memoir, as 'a powerful tool of…personal redefinition' (Smith, 2011, online) becomes an interesting choice of expression in this regard.

According to Smith, the author's sharing of intimate experiences allows people 'who believe themselves to be isolated to identify with someone in a similar situation.' Through the act of identification, they can achieve 'a sense of relief and belonging' (Smith, 2011, online). In her interview, Janmohamed comments on the lack of 'role models' among Muslim writers whilst growing up:

> I don't remember reading anything when I was growing up that I could relate to and say 'look a story like mine!' In fact I think literature and books are just part of a wider lack of role models…there came a day where I couldn't bear to see any stories that weren't a bit more like mine. And I figured nobody was going to write it if I wasn't going to write it (Janmohamed).

Her memoir therefore allows readers to find 'relief' in the sharing of experiences with the author. Smith believes that by articulating the experiences of one person's life, the author can also help others make sense of their own lives (Smith, 2011, online). She lends further elaboration to this by arguing that 'no individual, however marginalized or dispossessed' is ever entirely isolated from a community. The authors' account of the self can therefore 'create a larger self' emblematic of an entire community of people. The act of identification encourages others to produce similar narratives (Smith, 2011, online). Indeed, Khan comments that Robert's book was 'probably the first British convert tale written for a mainstream readership.' Since then, there has been 'something of a boom in 'revert lit.' Whether or not Robert's book had the direct effect of encouraging more 'revert narratives' is uncertain. However, for certain Muslim communities, the memoir does appear to be an empowering textual genre as it encourages more women to write, thus increasing their representation in the mainstream book industry.

The writers are however slightly too optimistic about the potential benefits of the memoir. For example, in hoping that the production of more narratives by Muslims will help promote a positive image of Islam within British society, Khan concludes:

> If a hundred positive books about Muslims come out in one year, it won't be too many.

Of course, this is a common wish of ideological thinkers. As attractive as the idea sounds, large numbers of books positive about Muslims alone will not necessarily change negative public opinion about Muslims, or promote Islam in a better way to a sceptical British readership. A large number of ideological narratives cannot guarantee that the intended message will disseminate amongst the wider public.

Muslim Writing and Muslim Writers

As ideological writers, the women's ideas and opinions of the generic category 'Muslim writing' becomes significant. Scholarly work stresses the inherent heterogeneity of Muslim writers and their narrative preoccupations but does not provide much discussion on the writers' own opinions of this category.[12] The interviews therefore aimed to understand how the writers felt about the label 'Muslim writing.' From the previous sections, it is evident that the women consider their writings to be manifestations of religious activism in response to 'Islamophobic' narratives that essentialize Muslims. Yet by ignoring the significant differences in the ways a person could be religiously motivated, the authors essentialize other Muslim writers who do not conform to their own particular religious ideas. Indeed, Chambers' research argues that the category of Muslim writers is inclusive of a heterogeneous spectrum. This includes writers of varying ideological positions, including Muslim writers who are critical of Islamic practices both publically and privately. To various extents, all the writers in this study depart from this acceptance of heterogeneity.

As ideological Muslims, the elevation of Islam and positive representations of Muslims are of crucial importance to the three authors' own writing. Hence Muslim writers who do not share the same religious motivations as them are criticised. Speaking about the purpose of Muslim writing, Robert comments:

[12] See for example Chambers' conclusion in *British Muslim Fictions* (2011, 268-271).

> My experience with Muslim writers is that they do often have a message that they want to convey, even if the story is personal. There is intentionality there, a sense of purpose or mission, of not wanting to write 'just to write', but for one's writing to serve a higher purpose…we seem to have moved away from this style to a more subtle, nuanced form of 'da'wah with the pen.'

Although the methodological limitations of my interview with Robert may have curtailed some deeper insights,[13] she appears to question the place of secular or cultural Muslims within the hierarchy of Muslim writing. Her definition of Muslim is inclusive only of writers who are religiously motivated in the same way as her. Khan is particularly critical of Muslim writers who do not share her religious motivation; moreover she does not recognise that these writers may be religiously motivated in different ways. For example, when speaking of novelist Tahmima Anam, she criticises her on two fronts, firstly for her apparent unwillingness to write 'positive' books about Islam and secondly for her seeming reluctance to position herself as a Muslim author. Thus, Khan concludes:

> For [her], faith is just accidental; faith is not why she writes.

Khan makes similar remarks about Monica Ali and another Muslim journalist. However, she does not consider the possibility that these women may be religiously motivated in different ways. By failing to recognise the significant differences in the ways of practicing Islam that exist between different Muslims, she presents a two-dimensional view of Muslim women that effectively essentializes them in the same way that Orientalism essentializes diverse Muslim communities.

On the topic of Muslim writers, Janmohamed appeared be the most reflective about the nature of the category.[14] She summarises her concerns succinctly in the following comment:

> The challenge for encouraging—quotation marks—Muslim writing, is do you encourage Muslims because everybody should write and everybody should

[13] The interview was conducted via one email exchange. Consequently I did not have the opportunity to probe her ideas and opinions in depth.

[14] This can partly be explained through her association with the Muslim Writers Award which welcomes submissions by writers of diverse topics. Its only criteria is not to accept 'offensive or unacceptable material' to the Unpublished category, including prohibitions on 'vulgar, explicit, pornographic, violent and obscene content, gratuitous blasphemy and hate speech' (Chambers, 2011, 17).

> be in the public space, or do you come from a social activist perspective and say we need to have Muslims who are talking about their identity and writing about Muslim experience encouraged? I think both are valid and I think that's something that Muslims struggle with (Janmohamed).

Quoting the Rushdie Affair, she also comments on the need for all writers to be aware of the political and social settings that they are writing in, concluding that 'that's obviously a literary discussion about whether an artist should worry about that or not.' The compromise between creative artistic licence and outraging community standards is certainly a debated subject in academia (Hannabuss and Allard, 1994, 25). Janmohamed expresses particular annoyance at Muslim authors who 'cash in' on 'fashionable literature' portraying Muslim communities as patriarchal and backwards. She argues that these writers 'do not consider the repercussions of their writing on the communities they describe.' Here Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* is used as an example.

On the topic of representation, when asked whether Muslim writing should always be concerned with exploring Muslim identity, Khan replies in the affirmative. She refers to the burden of representation that Muslim writers shoulder, commenting: 'even if you don't self-identify as Muslim, you are typecast.' Thus 'fairly or unfairly,' Muslim writers are expected to write about 'Muslim issues.' In *British Muslim Fictions,* Chambers makes a similar point by using the example of Monica Ali's *Alentejo Blue* (2007). This narrative, centring on a Portuguese community, received negative feedback from literary critics because the topic was not associated with the author's own community (Chambers, 2011, 12). Khan draws on the same example to argue that Muslims cannot 'divorce' their identity from their writing due to the political weight that the 'Muslim' identity label carries. She uses an example of a Muslim journalist writing for The Sun:

> You can't divorce your background and just be a writer…I've seen women like that—there was one just trying to be a woman writing, a journalist, but she kept being framed as a Muslim woman journalist …there may come a time where another community is the focus and nobody's bothered anymore about a Muslim name. But not right now (Khan).

Thus, according to these examples, ‘Muslim’ writers shoulder the burden of representation whether or not they choose to identify as Muslim. Janmohamed acknowledges this and is critical of it, arguing that ‘being a Muslim writer does not necessarily mean you have to write about things which are Muslim.’ Robert expresses similar sentiments about the typecasting of Muslim writers, commenting:

> There are some that see Muslim women as two-dimensional beings. We have certain identities, certain concerns and, beyond that, there is a void. Well, I think that is terribly untrue (Robert).

From these comments it can be inferred that the women’s opinions about the category ‘Muslim writers’ differs on many points from the academic literature cited earlier. While this scholarship stresses the heterogeneity of 'Muslim writers' as a group, the writers in the study here are reluctant to accept definitions of writers as ‘Muslim’ who depart from their own particular religious positions and may be described as ‘cultural’ and ‘heritage’ Muslims. As ideological writers, the authors here tend to favour Muslim writers who are preoccupied with the same religious motivations as their own. Muslim writers whose writing is ‘exploratory,’ who are ‘not concerned with conveying an Islamic message’ (Robert) and who are ‘writing for the sake of art’ (Khan) are met with varying degrees of disapproval. This is at odds with their comments that Muslim writers should not have to shoulder the burden of representation.

SECTION FOUR

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This study has analysed the ideas and opinions of three British Muslim writers in relation to their memoir writing. It has explored the writers' reasons and motivations for writing, and their opinions about 'Muslim writing' in general. Out of three, two are published memoir authors while the third is unpublished, although her insights into British Muslim writing have proven useful to this study. I have presented the findings without laboriously comparing and contrasting the writers' views in detail. However, the interviews have produced interesting commonalities in the positions of the writers. In general, the women's main reasons for writing are to promote particular Islamic values and to challenge 'Islamophobic' representations of Muslims in popular fiction and non-fiction. The women happen to share a lot in common, including shared religious motivation, orthodox positioning, and similar views about what should constitute 'Muslim writing'. They theorise their writing as a 'duty' of *daw'ah* and social activism, both of which, for them, are 'Islamic commitments.' Their perceptions of what should constitute 'Muslim writing' are greatly shaped by ideological positions that refuse to accept any criticism of Islam or Muslim religious practices - practices which are regarded as 'negative' are attributed to 'culture' rather than inherent to Islam.

By promoting orthodox Islamic values and attempting to challenge Islamophobic representations of Muslims, the three writers in this study aim to provide an alternative picture of Islam to a mainstream readership. This picture is positive and liberating and ultimately seeks to repair the damage caused to Muslim identity by Orientalist discourses. As has been argued in the section entitled 'Writing Back: Challenging Islamophobia,' the dominant discourse of Muslims and Islam in Britain is embedded in Orientalist assumptions. These assumptions 'Otherize,' stereotype, and problematize Muslim identity (Afshar, 2008, 411). According to Afshar, Orientalism is not merely part of a forgotten past but remains very much at the core of the current history in the West and current wars in the Middle East (Afshar, 2008, 413).

In seeking to provide an alternative 'positive' depiction of Islam, the women's memoirs can be described as counter stories. In particular, the writers here seek to

challenge the narratives of other Muslims writers who utilize 'Orientalist tropes' in the depictions of their own communities. Rushdie's book is quoted more than once in these findings, as is Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*. Although Rushdie and Ali may not self-define as Muslim, their shared heritage with Muslim communities puts them into this category (Chambers, 2011, 5).

In seeking to repair identities which have seemingly been damaged by these narratives, Morey and Yaqin acknowledge the necessity of counter stories to be heard:

> The positive self-fashioning of Muslims, both in their personal lives and in their utilizing of the same media often used by others to carry out framing, indicates the desire to find a space beyond the frame…[these] voices must be allowed to speak and *be seriously listened to* before any progress can be made to unpick stereotypes and allow Muslims as they are to walk out of the frame…(Morey and Yaqin, 2011, 214, 216).

However a difficultly arises in assessing the extent to which the women's narratives actually work as counter stories. According to Nelson, counter stories 'root out the master narratives in the tissue of stories that constitute an oppressive identity and replace them with stories that depict the person as morally worthy' (Nelson, 2001, 150). As noted earlier, scholarship has labelled 'Orientalist' depictions of Islam and Muslims as essentialist and thus oppressive. It appears that at least two of the writers in this study too, are making no difference between writers as diverse as Rushdie, Ali, Anam and Hirsi-Ali, and are therefore 'essentializing'. Nash has argued that criticism of Islam should not be proscribed, for if it is, then any critique of Muslim religious orthodox practice(s) can be deemed oppressive (2012, 6). If the immediate purpose of the women's counter stories is to repair identities damaged by essentialization and oppression (Nelson, 2001, 20), then the women's opposition to any form of negativity to Islam and reluctance to include Muslim writers critical of Islam in the category 'Muslim writers' would appear to compromise their attempts at 'reclaiming moral agency.'

The spectrum of 'British Muslim writers' is vast, encompassing authors of many different ethnic, cultural, ideological and religious positions. Using interviews, I have given an account of the ideas and positions of three ideological Muslim writers

regarding their own writing as well as their views on fellow writers. Although the study here considers only three writers and therefore is limited in any general conclusions that could be drawn about Muslim writing, it does provide an insight into Muslim memoir writing in Britain. This study therefore adds to the burgeoning area of the study of 'Muslim writing' by focusing on the previously neglected sub-genre of memoir.

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