

*‘We don’t make life, we reflect it’  
Eastenders’*

*Masood family and the question of Islamophobic  
representation within the British Media.*

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# Abstract

Using *Eastenders*' Masood family, in this dissertation I question the *Muslims in the British Media* literature's underlying assumption that all British Muslim media representations are Islamophobic. I show this by exploring how the Masoods draw upon stereotypical, yet relevant cultural tropes to empower British Muslim culture. I argue that these tropes deconstruct the expectations of its wider, dominant 'self' audience to undermine the position of the literature. Beginning with why *Eastenders* was chosen, my theoretical grounding lies within the wider Orientalism, Islamophobia and Media Studies literature, which informs my literature review and exposes a gap within it for this research.

This qualitative research is based on two semi-structured interviews and brief observations with British Muslim families in their homes. These act as the primary data that is analysed from a post-structuralist approach. The respondents' narratives are compared to those portrayed on-screen to determine the extent to which they correlate. Despite my initial assumption that the respondents' would find their representation problematic, the interviews reversed my expectations completely and lead me to question the literature in which I was grounded instead. The impact of this reversal, along with problems accessing the professional and British Muslim communities are reflected upon following these methodological and practical considerations.

To conclude, I advocate a new, *dynamic* methodological reading of Islamophobia in British media representations, which recognises the difference between print media and television media. The trope of patriarchy is used to explore how the Masoods' portrayal remains relevant to the everyday, 'lived' experiences of British Muslims. In this way, the Masoods are found to be a 'good', *dynamic* stereotype based on this. It is clearly not a *static* parody, undermining the literature's generalised claims that all British Muslim media representations are 'Islamophobic'. From this, I argue that the literature's failure to recognise the Masoods' success is two-fold. Firstly, that it relies on the same, *static* reading of British Muslims to construct Islamophobia as an all-encompassing threat. Secondly, that it largely fails to recognise the physical and cognitive differences between media formats which dictate its representations. This means that its sweeping generalisations come from a very specific, limited, and therefore ungrounded foundation.

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# Introduction

This dissertation aims to critique the existing literature on *Muslims in the British Media*, showing how *Eastenders* constructs a representation that both adequately captures ‘real’ British Muslim life and also challenges the dominant Islamophobic tropes<sup>1</sup> which this literature latches on to. Based on qualitative interviews with two British Muslim families, the Masood family is found to draw upon tropes that still correlate with their own identities as British Muslim families rather than parody them. In turn, I undermine a hegemonic assumption of the field itself; that popular perceptions of British Muslims are ‘exploited by media... to feed *xenophobia* of a new kind’ (Ciftci, 2012: 307). This is unsurprising given that the field is theoretically grounded in Orientalism and emerges out of the 1997 Runnymede Trust report *Islamophobia: A challenge for us All*. For this reason, I begin from the same position; a brief exposition of which is given below. I also explain why I have chosen *Eastenders* as a case study; due to its cultural significance, the political influence of the BBC, and the importance of the Masood family as a cultural representation<sup>2</sup>.

Introduced in 2007, the Masoods are a working class South Asian Muslim family that are second-generation Pakistani migrants. They live in the heart of Albert Square<sup>3</sup> and their family structure represents a typical family unit: Father, Mother, two sons and a daughter who were all born in the UK<sup>4</sup>. Masood Ahmed, the father, is the head of the household and a postal worker, whose storylines typically involve him dealing with the family’s debt (*Eastenders*: Masood Ahmed).

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<sup>1</sup> A commonly recurring literary device, motif or cliché (Merriam-Webster, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Hall (1992) advocates conceptualising ‘culture’ appropriate to the programme of work (13), negotiating between culture as collective membership, ideology or practice (14 – 17). For this project I take Hall’s structuralist definition of ‘culture’: ‘it was itself a practice – a *signifying* practice – and had its own determinant product: meaning.’ (17). Practice refers to unique ‘internal forms and relations, its internal structuration’ that is ‘spoken through its codes and systems’ (17). Therefore, by ‘cultural’ representation I mean the ‘lived’ practices that are performed through every day, observable actions and interactions, because how we represent ourselves to the wider world gives meaning to how we are represented (Hall, 1996:4). My definition is justified by its relevance to the research aims, where broadcast media representations focus on similarly observable practices.

<sup>3</sup> The main residential area of the soap.

<sup>4</sup> Their daughter Shabnam Masood was a short-lived character who lacked any significant development, so I have ignored this character in favour of the central family members (Nathan & Blackburn, 2008).

His wife, Zainab Masood, is both a devoted mother and shrewd business woman (*Eastenders*: Zainab Khan). Syed Masood, the eldest son, is estranged from the core family unit having stolen from the family previously and for being a gay Muslim (Green, 2009), which the family struggles to reconcile with their cultural and religious beliefs. Tamwar Masood is the awkward younger son and is portrayed through the social pressures he experiences from his family and his peers (*Eastenders*: Tamwar Masood). This family make-up is fundamental because it is the dominant cultural practice which defines its representation.

### *Orientalism and Islamophobia*

Orientalism is the theoretical position from which I approach British Muslims in the media, establishing the conceptual need for stereotyping in representing the Eastern 'other' to the Western 'self' audience. Pioneered by Edward Said (1978), Orientalist discourse is the 'Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient... politically, sociologically, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period' (2003: 3). Said is clear to state that these are '*representations*, not a "*natural*" depiction of the Orient' (2003: 21), just as the media constructs '*representations*' within its articles, characters and storylines.

Foucault's aesthetic anti-essentialist self serves as the philosophical foundation for Said's 'self' and 'other'; constructions not of substance but of 'a form which is constituted through practices that are always specific to particular social and historical contexts' (O'Leary, 2002: 11). Epistemology constructs ontology through 'the machineries of power'<sup>5</sup> (Foucault, 1997: 33), which are situated within wider socio-historical narratives. In modernity, the ideological dominance of the Western rational, scientific worldview gives meaning to the epistemology that creates the Western man as 'self', overcoming a plethora of other possible human subjections (Barker, 1993: 77). By being fundamentally different, the East is necessarily subordinate to this discourse; the 'other' that

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<sup>5</sup> The exercise of knowledge through a 'right of sovereignty' over other subjections and a 'mechanism of discipline' in which to legitimise this dominant mode (Foucault, 1997: 37).

is constituted by its distance and disempowerment from the dominant 'self' (O'Leary, 2002: 121). This difference, as Deleuze puts, determines the form of the 'other' as a unilateral distinction from the 'self' (1994: 28): opposite ends of the same scale. Both the 'self' and the 'other' 'relate to the requirements of the concept in general' (Deleuze, 1994: 29)<sup>6</sup>, with the 'self' reciprocally constructing itself as opposed to the 'other' to maintain this distance. However, it is the 'other' that legitimises these constructions from pure fiction by recognising and internalising the prescribed, subordinate form, as a preference of one way of life over another (Derrida, 1985).

As a result, representations of the 'other' become 'not the Orient as it is but the Orient as it is Orientalised' (Said, 1978: 104), using stereotypes to construct the East as the 'perverted self' (Jubb, 2005: 233). Due to the lack of substance to these constructions, stereotypes must be highly generalised in order to encapsulate the conceptual category in which difference is made<sup>7</sup>. Stereotypes are therefore necessary cognitive devices (Blanks, 1999: 39) for the 'self' to come to terms with the 'other', breaking from Said in that this is not a moral dilemma. Rather, by drawing on the 'resources of signs, symbols and alterity' (Deleuze, 1994: 24) of the dominant discourse these simplified models can also become parodies of the 'self'. The extent to which they are merely parodies of the 'self' is dependent upon how much the stereotype exclusively grounds itself in these unsubstantiated signifiers.

This introduces a moral problematic to stereotyping that allows discourses on Islamophobia to comment on their construction. Beginning from Gottschalk & Greenberg (2008), Islamophobia 'reflects a *social* anxiety toward Islam and Muslim cultures that is largely unexamined, yet deeply ingrained in' the dominant culture (5). Muslim experiences of Islamophobia are therefore cultural, experienced through practices that promote 'exclusions, or the actual exclusions of people in virtue

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<sup>6</sup> So where the West is rational, scientific and modern, the East is irrational, spiritual and backward.

<sup>7</sup> As Bitterli (1989) explains, these are not 'falsehoods' because they must be rooted in some particular cases, but are 'simplified models which are necessary if we are to cope with the multiplicity of experience' (6) as the 'self' distanced from the 'other'.

of their being deemed members of different racial groups' (Goldberg, 1993: 98)<sup>8</sup>. Again drawing from Hall, representations can be positioned in order to 'cut' identities to emphasise these differences, playing upon the anxieties of the dominant culture (Hall, 1990). For the literature, then, I take Islamophobia to mean the discourse on the extent to which the tropes used 'justify discriminatory practices towards Muslims and exclusion of Muslims from mainstream society' (Runnymede Trust, 1997: 13).

### *The BBC*

As 'the cornerstone of public service broadcasting in the UK'<sup>9</sup> (Macdonald, 1993: 76) the BBC is a dominant feature in British contemporary life and culture (Madge, 1989: 18). Supported by parliament and funded by the public themselves (Macdonald, 1993: 77 – 78)<sup>10</sup>, the public service element places the BBC in a unique position of political power and responsibility that shapes its broadcasting ethos. This is, as Burns puts; 'what they regard as consonant with the nation's central, political, and moral values or a desirable and tolerable departure from them' (1977: 41)<sup>11</sup>. It therefore utilises its parliamentary underpinnings to present a brand of British normativity and independent professionalism<sup>12</sup> which its commercial contemporaries cannot (Burns, 1977: 43).

However, the BBC's claims to impartial professionalism, which have allowed it to hold hallowed ground as the *de facto* commentator on British society, has been severely undermined recently<sup>13</sup>, as Aitken argues: 'one of the ways that the BBC's institutional bias most distorts the national debate is how some favoured topics get almost limitless airtime while others figure hardly

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<sup>8</sup> See Meer & Modood's (2010) analysis of the 2004 Runnymede follow-up Commission for a stark example of discrimination through visual cultural markers (132 – 133).

<sup>9</sup> With BBC One reaching 76.6% of the UK population 2012/2013 weekly (BBC, 2013: 66).

<sup>10</sup> Unlike commercially funded independent broadcasting companies, like ITV, which rely on advertising and do not have state backing.

<sup>11</sup> Still holding dear to Lord Reith's (its first General Manager) original manifesto (Macdonald, 1993: 77).

<sup>12</sup> For the BBC and the public this remains one of the largest factors in its trusted status above commercial stations, with 49% preferring its news output over any others (BBC, 2013: 19).

<sup>13</sup> 'With broadcasting reputations now fallen as low as those of print journalists' (Fletcher, 2012: 3).

at all' (2008: 15)<sup>14</sup>. As a manufacturer of media products to be consumed by an audience, threats to its claim to impartiality threaten its process of depicting the consumer's world (Tracey, 1977: 59) and the depictions/products themselves. The significance of this cannot be understated, for the shaking of the BBC's edifice shakes a world presented to the vast majority of Britons; one that has dominated their televisions since the inception of British broadcasting itself.

## *Eastenders*

*Eastenders* is the epitome of the BBC's depiction of contemporary British life, as the flagship drama of the BBC<sup>15</sup> that is both one of the longest running and most popular soap operas in the UK<sup>16</sup>. The BBC's impartial, normative ethos defines its form as a television soap, as its creator Julia Smith clearly states; 'we decided to go for a realistic, fairly outspoken type of drama which could encompass stories about homosexuality, rape, unemployment, racial prejudice, etc., in a believable context. Above all, we wanted realism' (Geraghty, 1991: 16). This has enabled it to become a cultural institution in the UK, resonating with the working class Britain that it aims to reflect (Barker, 1997: 79).

With this in mind, Santer's (executive producer (2007 – 2010)) attempt to 'diversify' the show through the Masoods (Armstrong, 2007) has had a potentially significant impact on the representation of British Muslims to wider British society. The introduction of the Masood family in 2007 demonstrates the importance of realism as a process to create its world, responding to claims that it fails to represent the East End's true ethnic makeup<sup>17</sup>. On the other hand, the show has markedly failed to represent the British Asian and Muslim community, with no Muslim central characters since 1990 and the axing of the Ferreiras in 2005. The Ferreiras in particular were highly

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<sup>14</sup> The significance of this is clear where Poole (2002: 61 – 98) highlights that a similar method is used by the British print media to exclusively portray particular themes with British Muslims.

<sup>15</sup> Taking approximately 47% of BBC One's total drama airtime.

<sup>16</sup> Regularly contending with *Coronation Street* (ITV) and *Emmerdale* (ITV) in ratings (see BARB, 2013), despite a more recent crisis (Boyle, 2013).

<sup>17</sup> From the Commission for Racial Equality; Average 9% visible minority faces against the East End's ethnic population of 37% (Myall, 2002).

criticized by British Asian viewers for 'providing an unrealistic and poorly researched portrayal of Asian life in the UK' (Taylor, 2004), as they recycled 'static stereotypes' to create 'derogatory caricatures' (Sanchez, 2010: 7). By claiming to reflect 'real' British everyday life, *Eastenders* has been found to draw upon a static parody of British Asians that is essentially overtly Islamophobic, which is outwardly rejected by its British Asian consumers.

Therefore, analyzing the Masoods is of paramount importance to determine the extent to which Islamophobia permeates the wider British media. *Eastenders'* overwhelming consumer popularity and political backing means it has significant cultural power in Britain. Its constructions of the 'self/other', seen through the interactions and storylines on-screen, can thus legitimately affirm or marginalize particular cultural practices against the (BBC's) dominant British norms. As a representation of the British Muslim family in a working class context, the Masood's portrayal is well placed to cultivate Islamophobic 'moral panics' that have been the preferred reading particularly by working class Britain (Frost, 2008).

This dissertation is organised into two sections: the preliminary work which frames the research question, and the analysis of the findings themselves. Chapter 1 is the literature review, where the study of British broadcast media is found to be a notable gap in the field of *Muslims in the British Media*. In chapter 2 I establish my research methodology and method. This research is a purely qualitative study in the form of two semi-structured interviews with two British Muslim families, which are augmented by brief observations. Chapter 3 are my reflections on the research process, which are categorised into three problematic areas: theoretical issues, gaining access, and managing the self.

I then move on to my findings in the proceeding chapters to form a critique of the existing tropes for British Muslims in the media. Chapter 4 is an assessment of the Masoods as a British Muslim stereotype. Here patriarchy is used as an exemplary stereotypical trope, one which would

normally be considered problematic, but is found to be extremely relevant and internalised within the respondents' own narratives. Chapter 5 then questions Islamophobia in this representation, by it not recycling a rehearsed, *static stereotype*. This has serious implications for the wider field because this new reading cannot be comprehended within the existing literature, which treats all media and its representations as one homogenous unit. Yet whereas one media format might be problematic, it does not follow that all uses of stereotypes must be Islamophobic. Finally, I call for more research into British broadcast media to determine the extent to which 'good' representations of British Muslims exist. I also propose areas in which further research in this project would be needed.

# Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to demonstrate how I situated my research within more established discourses. The parameters of the literature were dictated solely by the main research questions asked and are encapsulated by the following five fields: Orientalism, Islamophobia and Media Studies, British Muslims in print media and Muslims in electronic media (TV and Film). Whilst I make reference to wider literature on British Muslim identity and politics, this is within more dedicated work on representation and its critical evaluation. Similarly, Islamic theological sources were eschewed as I take 'Muslim' to be a cultural construct. Public-policy, counter-terrorism and 9/11 studies were excluded completely as they are widely covered in the media literature, along with mosques, mosque leadership and education that is beyond the purview of the television show.

By strictly limiting myself in this way, I believe that I have a strong framework of secondary literature from which to analyse my primary data. However, due to the innovative nature of this research there is a distinct lack of literature specifically related to British Muslim representation in the broadcast media. Ahmed's (2013) pioneering study highlights these shortcomings in his bibliography, which similarly relies on comparisons with 'the same problematic narratives found in other media' (95). Therefore, the bibliography is informative to studying British Muslims in the wider media, but as the field of British Muslims in the broadcast media is itself emergent specific literature is sparse.

## *Orientalism*

Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) is the foundation of my theoretical position, establishing the basis of misrepresentation in Western constructions of British Muslims. The works of key French philosophers Foucault (1997), Derrida (1985) and Deleuze (1994) establish how these constructions inherently misrepresent by producing knowledge through the dominant/inferior power discourse

between West and East. This is pervasive throughout pre-modern visual imagery of Muslims (Jubb, 2005; Morrisoe, 2011), which now defines the tropes commonly employed by the European and American media<sup>18</sup> (Amis, 2008). Its relevance to the creation of British Muslim television characters is clear where these stereotypes continue to define their writing and production.

Contemporary attitudes to Orientalism can be encapsulated in two broad approaches: eradicating the roots or deconstructing the discourse. As a perceived barrier to accepting diversity, some contemporary scholars hold that the only way beyond Orientalism is to move beyond the historical legacies that give rise to the West/East binary, facilitated by the advancement of the globalised world (Frank, 2010; Samiei, 2010; Makdisi, 2010). Conversely, Lewis (2004) identifies that Orientalist discourse has been, and can be, a site of debate and creativity, as a means of constructing the East both from the West and within its own people. Rather than seeking to eradicate this discourse, Ghazoul (2004), Varisco (2007), and Balagangadhara & Keppens (2009) advocate the deconstruction of the discourse to identify 'bad practice' from 'reliable misrepresentations', to improve scholarship and knowledge of the East (and West) by constructing coexisting understandings of each other. This is where my research is situated within the broader Orientalism literature; deconstructing media stereotypes to produce 'good' representations of British Muslims.

Yet, critics have dismissed Orientalist criticism on the grounds that it is a pointless endeavour, with stereotyping so pervasive that identifying particular representations can always be met with an opposing other (Irwin, 2006; Matar, 1999), or represents an unrealistically 'impoverished view of human beings' (Mellor, 2004: 102). Such a casual dismissal cannot be considered in a post 9/11 context, where notions of imperialism and colonisation permeate the Western presence in the Middle East (Burbach & Tarbell, 2004; Dabashi, 2009; Mahajan, 2002, 2003). Also, Porter's (1993) much more nuanced criticism exemplifies its philosophical critique, contending that Said's use of Foucault and Gramsci contradicts itself by both affirming and denying

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<sup>18</sup> Particularly in cinema (Sardar & Davies, 2010).

human agency in identity construction. Whilst it is clear that human agency is framed by the dominant power discourses in which it exists, the interplay between the 'roots and routes' of identity show that agency remains a creative authority (Gilroy, 2000; Hall, 1992; Brah, 1996).

## *Islamophobia*

The pervasiveness of Orientalist stereotypes within the media means that literature on Islamophobia must also be consulted. However, the term itself is fiercely contested (Allen, 2010: 159) between a number of different foci<sup>19</sup>. Rana (2007) identifies that Islamophobia has emerged from the wider and much more established discourses on racism, and has been conceptualised as cultural racism from a perceived anxiety in the dominant culture (Maddood, 2005; Gottschalk & Greenberg, 2008). However, this has increasingly come under criticism for conflating religious and ideological anxiety with cultural difference, missing the true processes behind Islamophobic experiences (Taras, 2013; Ahmad & Evergeti, 2010; Allen, 2010). Others contend that Islamophobia should be fought in the political arena, challenging public policy and legislation that criminalises and disempowers the Muslim community specifically, which in turn breeds wider moral panic (Kumar, 2012; Bonino, 2012; Sheehi, 2010). Still, as racial language is typically used to depict Islamophobic experience<sup>20</sup>, taking Islamophobia as a form of cultural racism is pertinent to considering media texts.

In this way, my primary focus lies with the product (act/event) and not the processes that lead to these acts (Goldberg, 1993: 98; Werbner, 2013). Drawing from wider literature on racism allows for further nuance into identifying these products: between overt (Scheurich & Young, 2002) and microaggressive (Sue et. al., 2007; Nadal, 2011) manifestations. Kevin Nadal *et. al.*'s qualitative

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<sup>19</sup> The term 'Islamophobia' itself is etymologically problematic, clearly not resembling an irrational mental pathology - such as Agoraphobia - (Hudson & Rapee, 2000) or a fear of social scrutiny or embarrassment (Kleinknecht *et. al.*, 1997).

<sup>20</sup> Such as immigrants threat to 'British-ness' (Barker, 1981), attacks based on looking 'conspicuously Muslim' (Modood & Meer, 2010), and the media's use of hate crime when reporting Islamophobic incidents (Dodd, 2005).

study (2012) is the most definitive study involving specifically Islamophobic microaggressions<sup>21</sup>, identifying six key themes which constitute Islamophobia. This is an important distinction where microaggressions are the most pervasive yet unrecognised manifestation of Islamophobia to British Muslims, dominating everyday social interactions with Britain's wider social sphere<sup>22</sup>.

## *Media Studies*

My studies are underpinned by broader Media Studies theory, particularly the legacy of Marshall McLuhan and *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (1967). In this seminal text, McLuhan differentiates between print and (the then emergent) electronic media as having different roles integral to social and cultural change. This is because the physical attributes of each determine the cognitive scale, form and type of interactions with it (Mortensen, 2008: 379 – 382). For television, its constant, every day, 'bitesize' broadcast enables it to fit in with people's lives more-so than any other media format, historically rooting its portrayals within its consumers to create certain expectations (Lang & Lang, 1984; Hill, 2002; also see Turow, 2012). In this way, the use of tropes serves the specific functions of the media format, to render the stereotypical representation intelligible in its context (Frye, 1957; Kristeva, 1993).

The 'Muslim' stereotype crosses boundaries in the television context, physically and culturally moving from faraway lands to the next-door neighbour (Sanchez, 2010); see also Crofts, 1995). Fitzpatrick's (2009) analysis of popular fiction and memoirs provides an outstanding typology of how particular Muslim stereotypes are characterised, using different Orientalist discourses from its print media counterpart by stressing normalisation as a unifying, electronic process. From this, Lam (2009) offers further analysis of how patriarchy is a cross-type trope pervasive in all Muslim stereotypes, but is expressed in different ways according to the format. For this reason, patriarchy is

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<sup>21</sup> Although he correctly identifies that this field remains the least studied and represents an emergent discourse.

<sup>22</sup> See Moosavi's Public Lecture Series Lecture (2013) for example of how jokes from peers were unwittingly accepted as everyday parlance (see also Moosavi, 2013 for this within the media).

a suitable trope from which to analyse *Eastenders'* representation in terms of Islamophobia as its use is almost guaranteed.

### *British Muslims in Print Media*

Recognising the difference in media formats, contemporary Muslim representation in the British print media has maintained the Orientalist discourse of 'otherness' with vitriol; from the 'threatening immigrant' to the 'Arab terrorist' (Poole, 2002; Poole & Richardson, 2006; Allen & Nielsen, 2002; Khosravini, 2010)<sup>23</sup>. Poole's (2006) quantitative analysis of post 9/11 newspaper articles particularly highlights the increasing demand for the Muslim-as-terrorist, playing to the perceived expectations of British Muslims by wider British society and within Muslim communities<sup>24</sup> (see also Richardson, 2011; Ahmad, 2006). Their narrative form and style is typically culturally racial rather than religious or ideological (Frost, 2008; Housee, 2012), opening itself up to being Islamophobically microaggressive. Patriarchy is symbolic of these anxieties within the British print media, encapsulating the notions of threat (Abbas, 2001), the 'enemy within' (van Dijk, 1989), and gendered oppression (Fortier, 2008; Ahmad, 2013) that lie at the heart of these stereotypes.

### *Muslims in Electronic Media (TV and Film)*

It is immediately apparent that there is a gap in the literature pertaining to Muslim representation within British broadcast media, with only a couple of articles specifically questioning British Muslim television characters (Ahmed, 2013; Gillespie, 1995; Arthurs, 2010). Even the study of British soaps is considerably under researched in the field of television studies, despite its status as an important element of broadcast television (Geraghty, 2010). Dwyer (1998) highlights the pressing need to

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<sup>23</sup> The increasingly critical introspection from newspapers both in Britain and the US highlights these dominant Islamophobic tropes (Osborne, 2008; Bunglawala, 2012; Blumenfeld, 2013).

<sup>24</sup> Further suggested by the proliferation of Islamophobic attacks (Taylor & Siddique, 2013) and 'inflammatory' social media comments after the Woolwich attack (the examples are many, but the *Daily Mail's* coverage and comments provide an exemplary snapshot – Allen, V. 2013).

research these characters as figureheads of cultural knowledge for young British Muslims, who perceive them as dealing with realistic issues and themes which can be emulated in everyday life (59 – 63).

On the other hand, there has been much more work involving US television and cinema, which find that the same two tropes emerge as dominant character themes. In television, Hussain (2010) and Alsultany (2007) show how Muslim ‘regular joes’ are established as outsider immigrants through cultural alienation and violence<sup>25</sup>, to homogenously portray Islamic practice over any form of cultural engagement. Again, the ‘oppression’ of women is a significant trope in its construction (Hirji, 2011; Morey, 2010). Violence continues as the definitive practice of Islam in Hollywood, where the recent surge of gritty post-Gulf War and War on Iraq action movies have constructed the homogenous ‘Muslim Arab terrorist’ – the visual trope that immediately comes to mind when thinking of terrorist attacks (Arti, 2007; Shaheen, 2008; Ramji, 2005; Boggs & Pollard, 2006). Whilst this is not specific to the British context, the vast popularity of Hollywood and US television clearly has influence here to somewhat shape the expectations of wider British society (Austin, 2002). Therefore, this literature provides some foundation in which to ground the analysis of British characters, in lieu of any other research.

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<sup>25</sup> Physical and ideological.

# Research Methodology and Method

This research is a qualitative study based on interviews with two British Muslim families<sup>26</sup>, representing the primary data from which British Muslim perceptions of their *Eastenders* portrayal is discussed. The purpose of the interview was to explore the underlying aspects of cultural identity that inform the discourse between these characters and their British Muslim consumers. The ‘exploratory study’ therefore frames the following methodological considerations (Marshall & Rossman, 2011: 68). The following chapter is split into two parts: establishing the qualitative research methodology and setting out the practical considerations of the interview method.

## *Methodology*

Emerging within 20<sup>th</sup> Century Western society, British Muslims are faced with the challenges of the postmodern ontology; ‘as “mobile” as the world itself, changeable and protean, elusive, difficult to hold, uncertain – indeed, flexible’ (Bauman, 2002: 21). Economic and technical developments in the 1960’s lead key social theorists to question the legitimacy of modernity’s grand overarching narratives (see Baudrillard, 1994; Lyotard, 1984). In lieu of these metanarratives, the ‘self’ becomes ‘the site of an implosion of all [socio-cultural] boundaries’ (Kellner, 1989: 68), open to a myriad of ‘realities’ performed through new electronic mediums (Best & Kellner, 1997: 80). This accompanied a new politics of cultural difference to ‘trash the monolithic and homogenous’ symbolic frameworks of modernity ‘in the name of diversity’ (West, 1994: 65). For West (1994), marginalized communities - shunned by ‘degraded self-representations’ (65) – can now creatively embark on constructing new symbolic worlds as *bricoleur*, employing ‘improvisational and flexible sensibilities that sidestep mere... faceless universalism’ (81). In this way, postmodernism represents a ‘cultural logic’; a

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<sup>26</sup> The respondents have been anonymised in this research to uphold the ethical duty of confidentiality (Corti, Day & Backhouse, 2000: 3.1). I have removed all identifying details, defined as: place, company names (etc), addresses, and real names (Corti, Day & Backhouse, 2000: 4.3). These have been replaced pseudonyms that reflect their actual ethnic origins: Bengali and Pakistani (Corti, Day & Backhouse, 2000: 4.3.3).

distinct way of being (Featherstone, 2007: 8), that has ushered in new, subject-orientated epistemological and methodological ways to engage with the multiplicity of contemporary society and culture.

Following the focus on the destabilisation of cultural signs lead me to a post-structuralist epistemology; that 'truth' is not within the text but constructed through metaphor and the power of the author (Sarup, 1993: 3). The metaphor<sup>27</sup> has become significant in constructing these new symbolic worlds, linguistically holding cultural groups together by drawing upon a 'shared web of culture' common to them (Holyoak & Thagard, 1995: 211). However, through 'likening' metaphors pervade an understanding the world that directly links to phenomena, offering only a partial understanding mediated by the familiar concepts of who is using them (Drummond, 1998: 744). The metaphor is essentially political by drawing attention to both the similarities and differences of other ways of seeing (Sarup, 1993: 49 – 50), so they can be deployed by more powerful groups to emphasise difference and marginalise (Cresswell, 1997: 342 - 344). For Derrida, these 'binary oppositions' become our way of seeing; ideologies for structuring and experiencing the world (Sarup, 1993: 38). Taking *Eastenders* as a media text, the Masoods<sup>28</sup> become metaphors for the British (BBC) understanding of the unfamiliar Muslim, constructed in terms of the binary relationship between these two cultures.

Despite postmodernism representing an epistemological and methodological position in its own right (see Nicholson & Seidman, 1995; Rosenau, 1992: Chapter 7), post-structuralism resonates with this project in a number of ways. Key proponents of post-structuralism<sup>29</sup> are already embedded in my theoretical position and literature review, demonstrating a logical progression from theory to methodology. At its core, Orientalism and Islamophobia are concerned with the binary opposition of the 'self/other', which is ideologically maintained to structure the West/East. Derrida's notion of

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<sup>27</sup> 'An explanation of an unfamiliar concept made by likening it to the *characteristics* of a familiar one' (Gurney, 1999: 1706).

<sup>28</sup> As 'symbolic vehicles constituted within the rules of 'language'' (Hall, 1992: 128).

<sup>29</sup> Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze in particular.

deconstruction emulates the aims of this project perfectly, looking to 'locate the promising marginal text... to pry it loose with the positive lever of the signifier, to reverse the resident hierarchy, only to displace it' (Spivak, 1976: xxv).

As both maintain an emphasis on the subject, to explore the discourse between representation and consumer a purely qualitative study was chosen. Put by Geertz (1973), this is to provide 'thick' descriptions' of these meaning-making processes;

*'setting down the meaning particular social actions have for the actors whose actions they are, and stating, as explicitly as we can manage, what the knowledge thus attained demonstrates about the society in which it is found' (27).*

Marking a paradigm shift in social research<sup>30</sup>, Geertz's qualitative methodology signals a 'return to the particular' (Toulmin, 1990: 190) where social action is understood in terms of its cultural context (Geertz, 1973: 14). Understanding is generated not from 'grand' deductive theories but from 'locally, temporally and situationally limited narratives' (Flick, 2009: 12) that can come to terms with the pluralisation of the postmodern condition. The researcher 'becomes the research instrument' (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998: 42) penetrating into this context, interpreting and co-constructing these narratives from their own biography (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998: 29). Thus, it advocates a plethora of interpretive models, data collection methods and analytical tools to frame the construction of these narratives (Cain & Finch, 1981: 105 – 119).

However, taking interpretation as the fundamental investigative process entails that these narratives cannot be presented 'as itself' to link data and results, because this is determined by the researchers own theoretical assumptions and preconceptions (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009: 9). Reflection on these determinants is also a central commitment to

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<sup>30</sup> From the framework of the natural sciences and a preoccupation with generalizable principles (Flick, 2002: 2).

producing qualitative understanding. Alvesson & Skoldberg (2009) define this process as ‘the *interpretation of interpretation* and the launching of a critical self-exploration of one’s own interpretation of empirical material (including its construction)... by means of which this can be qualified’ (9). A qualitative methodology encapsulates the phenomena under investigation, which is grounded in empirical material but is made accessible through selecting and applying suitably open and reflexive methods of interpretation (Flick, 2009: 15).

A quantitative methodology would be solely inadequate for this task, lacking the depth and nuance to capture the subject’s perspective by relying on ‘more remote, inferential empirical materials’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998: 10). Quantitative research is often employed in studies of media representation to describe ‘the aggregation of data frequencies for key variables (Kabir & Bourk, 2012: 326)<sup>31</sup>. Whilst statistical data can be used to explain patterns between media representation and public perception, for example, by taking culture ‘at large’(Balnaves & Caputi, 2001: 4) its value is ‘necessarily longitudinal’ in nature (Balnaves & Caputi, 2001: 7). In casting its gaze wide it lacks the depth to produce meaning from the individual’s perspective because this perspective is reduced to a singular data point (Bryman, 2012: 179; Blumer, 1956: 685), distancing itself from the world it’s studying (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998: 10). Conversely, a qualitative approach incorporates interpretive practices that embed itself in the field, ‘stylizing people and events as a way of emphasizing their cultural traits’ (Baszanger & Dodier, 2004: 16) from the researcher’s own narrative (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998: 4). The following methodological considerations narrow down these qualitative considerations to a particular intellectual tradition.

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<sup>31</sup> Be it the percentage of news items on a topic out of total news items on a particular case (see Kumar, 2011: Table 1.), or the amount of content from specific sources within the text (see Hoewe et al., 2012: Table 2).

From the emphasis on culture and texts my methodological lens is clearly that of cultural studies; viewing through the ‘interplay between lived experience, texts or discourses and the social context’ (Saukko, 2003: 11). Cultural studies allows the researcher to ‘interrogate issues of domination and power’ (hooks, 2004: 156) inherent in legitimising the knowledge that the stereotype conveys (Pickering, 2001: 47). In this way, cultural studies flows logically from the literature on Orientalism and Islamophobia and a post-structuralist epistemology. This is because these discourses all interrogate how the power relationship of the ‘self/other’ is maintained.

However, as Saukko identifies there is a methodological tension between the post-structuralist epistemology and cultural studies’ three-faceted interest;

*‘to be truthful to the lived realities of other people runs into a contradiction with the poststructuralist aim to critically analyse discourses that form the very stuff out of which our experiences are made’ (2003: 12).*

These tensions give rise to three distinct methodological foci: ‘humanistic, ‘structuralist’ and ‘contenttextualist’ (Saukko, 2003: 19), or a mixture thereof (Saukko, 2003: 23 – 33). Adopting the ‘structuralist’ focus, I eschew the other foci to tie together the post-structuralist epistemology with an ethnographic methodology. Thus, I magnify the lens on ‘unravelling social tropes and discourses that, over time, have come to pass for a ‘truth’ about the world’ (Saukko, 2003: 21).

Ethnography is the chosen methodology that shapes my research method, exploring the British Muslim family as an ‘identity-in-culture’ which is both media and reality (Gray, 2003: 7). In its broadest sense, Fetterman (1998) outlines ethnography as ‘the art and science of describing a group or culture’ (1). It both considers the symbolic world of human experience under investigation and locates itself within it (Willis & Trondman, 2000: 7), seeking to understand how these symbols are given meaning in relation to these experiences (Willis & Trondman, 2000: 8). By locating this investigation within the world, a key feature of ethnography is its ‘empathetic understanding of the

social scene' (May, 2011: 166) to generate understanding sensitive to the social context in which these symbols and experiences exist. Therefore, ethnography is well suited to the sociological study of British Muslims, by developing heterogeneous understandings of Muslim experience specifically related to the various social contexts in which they inhabit (McLoughlin, 2007: 274).

To obtain this data ethnography employs a number of qualitative tools in tandem;

*'ethnography usually involves researcher participating, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions through formal and informal interviews... gathering whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the emerging focus of inquiry'* (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007: 3).

Seen through the lens of cultural studies, McRobbie suggests the following to inform the ethnographic design; 'an ethnographic approach which takes as its starting point the relational interactive quality of everyday life... by integrating into it a keen sense of history and contingency' (1992: 730). For example, Hobson and Morley's projects both explore how the media provides popular constructions for everyday being by investigating television consumption within the dynamics of family life (Gray, 2003: 46). Although participant observation is seen as the 'research tool *par excellence*' of ethnography, Walford (2009) highlights that new forms are emerging which distance themselves from this traditional form, especially where 'some claim it for studies which are based on interviews only' (274). Emulating these examples, the research method was designed to capture the interaction of 'lived' British Muslim experience with that portrayed on screen, by capturing its actual consumption through the interview.

## Method

My primary method of gathering data was through the interview, which allowed me to obtain the particular narratives of a small data set that fit within the practical restraints of this dissertation. Interviews 'yield rich insights into people's biographies, experiences, values, aspirations, attitudes and feelings' (May, 2011: 131), allowing the researcher to probe into the meaning-making discourse between the respondent and their wider world<sup>32</sup>. This allows me to focus on the interaction of the British Muslim family as consumer; asking specifically about what they think of the characters and how this relates to their actual experiences. Here, interviewing has an advantage over participant observation which typically produces much more longitudinal, 'heterogeneous' accounts (Baszanger & Dodier, 2004: 9). Additionally, due to the practical limitations of the dissertation<sup>33</sup> the sheer amount of data it produces is not viable for this project.

From the different types of interview; structured, semi-structured and narrative (May, 2011: 136), the semi-structured interview was the chosen format. This is because it is most suitable for the narrative needs of the project coupled with my limitations as a novice researcher. The semi-structured interview is where 'questions are normally specified, but the interviewer is freer to probe beyond the answers prejudicial to the aims of standardisation and comparability' (May, 2011: 134). Whilst unstructured interviews are typically associated with eliciting narratives from respondents<sup>34</sup>, as a novice interviewer structure was necessary to ensure the interview stayed on track, by asking specific questions for particular topics (see May, 2011: 136). On the other hand, a purely structured type offers 'little or no variability in any elaborations... in order to not influence the answers' (May, 2011: 133), inhibiting the ability to create a narrative by not probing beyond the questions.

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<sup>32</sup> For this reason, interviews have been a staple within research on British Muslims negotiating the wider British 'secular' context. Of particular interest are those involving the family unit, see *Religious nurture in Muslim families: implications for social work* (Scourfield et al., 2013), and Rogge (2013).

<sup>33</sup> Short time period and small word count specifically.

<sup>34</sup> Because of its open-ended nature, there is an emphasis on the unfettered dialogue between interviewer-interviewee which allows their narrative to emerge naturally (Fontana, 2003: 54).

Therefore, the semi-structured interview was the ideal balance between the need for narrative against my shortcomings as a novice interviewer.

My design of the questions reflects the semi-structured type, translating the research questions into 'an easy-going, colloquial form to generate spontaneous and rich descriptions' (Kvale, 1996: 130). Drawing from the 'terrorist' and 'immigrant' tropes that dominate media representation, the questions were designed to tackle two principal strands of enquiry. Most obvious are the questions pertaining to representation in terms of their relevance to everyday Muslim life, which were asked as precise, structured questions to reflect the definitive characteristics in comparison (Rogge, 2013: 174)<sup>35</sup>. Underlying these tropes are issues with power and power-relationships within and outside the Muslim family<sup>36</sup>. Probing responses and wider observations were used to this end; to contextualise these responses into narratives about their position, and the characters' position, within wider British culture (Rogge, 2013: 173 - 174). Table 1 shows how I developed the interview questions, thematically categorising the research and then branching these into 'colloquial' forms of comments rather than pre-set statements (see Kvale, 1996: 131)<sup>37</sup>.

I also utilised video clips to establish the key themes to be discussed, embedding the narratives produced within the television show itself<sup>3839</sup>. Horton & Wohl (1956) show how soap opera fans develop one-way relationships with the on-screen characters. This *parasocial* relationship makes the 'viewer feel that they know the persona in the same intimate way that they know and understand flesh-and-blood friends' (Perse & Rubin, 1989: 60). Viewing the characters

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<sup>35</sup> Corea (1995) demonstrates how definitive characteristics (particularly race, education and economic position) are overtly displayed to establish the 'moral worth' of actors in news reports.

<sup>36</sup> As both tropes are inherently concerned with power and power-relationships, presenting a perceived threat to the dominant culture and yet subservient to them (Woods, 2011; Florack et. al., 2010).

<sup>37</sup> I draw upon Kvale's text because it is both well established and very concise, providing clear question typologies (1996: 133 - 135) which really helped me conceptualise the design as a novice.

<sup>38</sup> To view the video clips in question please visit <http://eastendersinterviewclips.blogspot.co.uk/>. Uploaded are the exact clips I used in the interviews themselves.

<sup>39</sup> Although the use of video in interviews is far from new, Pink (2004: 64) states that there is little-to-no literature on the use of video to elicit responses as questions.

elicits a conversation about an in-world relationship, with conversational elements that enhance the depth of a respondents account<sup>40</sup> (Cathcart & Gumpert, 1983). As a result, video elicitation brings the interaction between the respondents and the characters to the fore, stimulating natural responses that gain valuable further insight into their narratives<sup>41</sup>.

Within the interview, three video clips were employed as questions to ground the proceeding discussion on a specific theme of enquiry. Video clips of the Masoods were accessed via Youtube<sup>42</sup>, which has an extensive library of official and fan-uploaded content<sup>43</sup> that is both easy to access and reaches back further than the BBC's back catalogue of available episodes<sup>44</sup>. Each clip chosen is a self-contained scene that could be understood on its own without extensive recourse to previous knowledge of the characters. This was to ensure that the theme of the scenes were intelligible to all the respondents<sup>45</sup>.

Drawing upon my own interest in the show, I identified three storylines which encapsulate the research themes from which to find definitive scenes. Clip 1 'Masoods move onto the Square' is one of the very first scenes featuring the Masoods. The introductory scene is important because it needs to immediately set-out the character's stereotype to the audience, quickly establishing a foundation from which the relationship with the audience and other characters will be built (Butler, 2007: 50 – 51). For this reason, the scene draws upon the most overt tropes to clearly and effectively establish the 'Asian Muslim family' stereotype. This facilitated direct comparison to the actual family make-up and experiences of the respondents, from which to analyse its construction

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<sup>40</sup> Such as speech acts, which are discussed in the analysis paragraph.

<sup>41</sup> See Henry & Fethers' (2012) study for how video stimulated better patient recall of emotional responses to operations, and Sayre's (2006) study of how video facilitated disaster survivors' accounts by establishing a foundation of trust with the actors.

<sup>42</sup> A video-sharing website which allows users (individuals and companies) to upload, watch and share originally created videos (Youtube Mission Statement).

<sup>43</sup> About 23900 search related results for 'The Masoods' (on 20/07/2013).

<sup>44</sup> BBC iPlayer (The BBC's online television catch-up service) typically offers a week's worth of episodes (on 20/07/2013).

<sup>45</sup> Although one of the requirements of choice of respondents was that all watched *Eastenders* and knew the Masood family, this did not guarantee the extent to which these characters were understood. Therefore, this was an attempt to regulate this variable.

and relevance. Clip 2 'Antony has lunch with the Masoods' builds upon the theme of family characterisation to incorporate power-relationships outside the household. Through their interaction this power-relationship is played out on screen, expressed through various assumptions and concessions by Antony (the boyfriend) and the Masoods – especially the parents. As a result, the introduction of the outsider into the closed family dynamic questions traditional power hierarchies of the 'self/other'. By purposely focussing on 'Muslim' as a cultural construction through these assumptions and characteristics, clip 3 'Masood gambles in secret' sharply introduces the role of religion as a characteristic (or lack thereof). The scene shows Masood Ahmed (the father) engaging in a strictly forbidden activity and lying to his wife. Yet this is portrayed in a humorous and entertaining fashion. The lack of reference to Islam by the respondents is brought into focus, questioning the extent to which both the characters and the respondents express religion as a cultural identity marker when engaging in wider British society.

Table 1 Research Themes and Interview Questions

Research Themes	Interview Questions
Introduction/Consumption of Show	<p>When do you normally watch the show? Do you watch it as a family?</p> <p>What is the appeal?</p>
Family/Representation	<p><b>Clip 1 ‘Masoods move onto the square’</b></p> <p>Why do you think they chose this scene?</p> <p>In what ways can you relate to the family portrayal?</p> <p>Probe: Why is dinner an important time?</p> <p>Probe: Why do you think they juxtaposed the scene with a scene of the pub straight after?</p>
Insider-Outsider/Power	<p><b>Clip 2 ‘Anthony has lunch with the Masoods’</b></p> <p>What do you think of this situation?</p> <p>Have you experienced the type of cultural assumptions/remarks that Antony (outside character) gives?</p> <p>Probe: Broader reflections on British opinion of Muslims?</p>
Culture/Religion	<p><b>Clip 3 ‘Masood gambles in secret’</b></p> <p>What do you think of this scene and the treatment of a Muslim gambling?</p> <p>Probe: Have you seen this? Would this ever be an action you would consider?</p> <p>What do you think of the scene being fairly light-hearted and humorous?</p> <p>Lead: Do you think that the religious aspect of the characters is diminished/hidden?</p> <p>How would you know that these characters are ‘Muslim’, and to what extent?</p> <p>Probe: Is this a problem you feel in British society?</p>
Concluding remarks	<p>Do you think <i>Eastenders</i> Masood family is a good representation of British Muslim family life?</p> <p>Probe: Why?</p> <p>Is there anything else you would like to discuss?</p>

Just as the field ethnographer produces accounts from the field in which they are situated<sup>46</sup>, it was important that the interview site was in the respondent's living room. This was to enrich the data both through direct observation and by enhancing the video elicitation process. For Gubrium & Holstein (1997), the field site is as much a narrative construction as the respondent's account by facilitating, hindering and giving meaning to particular meaning-making activities through its institutions, inter-personal behaviours and material productions. Observations of the respondent's living arrangements allowed me to physically compare the private world of the Masood family to the respondents, using artefacts – such as decoration and furniture – to 'reveal certain priorities or commitments... that are relevant to understanding a participant's experience in a particular place' (Elwood & Martin, 2000: 652)<sup>47</sup>.

Also, conducting the interview in the living room enhanced the act of 'viewing' to stimulate more natural responses. Bernhaupt et al. (2008) identify that for most western households 'people described the living room as a recreational area, with most of the activities in it relating to watching TV' alongside 'a place where people met to discuss the everyday occurrences of their lives' (10)<sup>48</sup>. As 'the parties bring with them expectations of their content and the role they may adopt as a result' (May, 2011: 141), framing the interview in this particular social space empowers the activity of discussion in relation to watching TV as the purpose of the interview (Elwood & Martin, 2000: 655). Consequently, the need for video-elicited responses<sup>49</sup> was developed naturally from the respondent, 'blending in' to the interview to form a much more natural narrative (May, 2011: 140).

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<sup>46</sup> Such as behaviours and interactions, conversations and verbal cues, sub-groups and 'stars', which only occur or have meaning in that given context (Angrosino, 2007: 40).

<sup>47</sup> I am particularly influenced by Wesselhoef's observation of French mosques (2010: 796), which uses very poetic, descriptive language to construct a narrative that adds to the respondent's verbal narrative (Loftland & Loftland, 1984).

<sup>48</sup> Due to the respondent's living rooms being fully furnished and 'lived in', I assume that this holds the same significance for these British Muslim households.

<sup>49</sup> Which are particular to the context of 'viewing' (Henry & Fethers, 2012: 118).

My choice of respondents was largely a pragmatic choice due to my limited contacts with Muslim communities and the short time frame in which to gather data<sup>50</sup>. The two families interviewed were primarily chosen on the willingness to conduct a family interview and who somewhat replicated the Masoods own make-up; Mother and Father, and a number of children, with a South Asian heritage. Furthermore, both families classed themselves as regular viewers of the show<sup>51</sup>; watching it most days at its scheduled time (around 8pm) with the majority of the family present<sup>52</sup>. This counts them as consumers relevant to the study. Although conversational English from all family members was initially required, this was simply not feasible where the parents of one family had a 'working' grasp of English. As a result, the parent's input in the first interview was mediated through their son (as translator), which necessarily distorts its initial meaning to a certain extent (Esposito, 2001: 572). Between the fact that the translation was immediate (see Esposito, 2001: 573), having verified the translation independently<sup>53</sup> and by drawing on visual speech acts, I feel that the content that was meant to be conveyed has been adequately captured.

My analytic approach focusses on comparing the narratives of the respondents to the narratives of the on-screen characters to identify the extent to which the narratives correlate with one another. This is in order to establish its success as a representation of British Muslim life. To do this I adopted Miller & Glassner's (2004) analysis of the narrative approach; 'to think about how respondents are using culturally available resources in order to construct their stories (134 – 5), from a shared stock of meanings and understandings (Richardson, 1990: 24). As alluded to previously, this analysis incorporated observational data and *how* the narrative is shaped, alongside *what* the content of the narrative elucidates (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000: 36). Heritage & Atkinson (1984) highlight that '*naturally occurring occasions of everyday interaction*' are intuitively interpreted to

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<sup>50</sup> Its limitations are discussed in the following chapter.

<sup>51</sup> This was surprisingly prevalent, where *Eastenders* is the UK's third most popular series amongst ethnic minorities (BARB, 2013).

<sup>52</sup> Regular family attendance was usually ensured due to the importance of dinnertime in both households, which just preceded the programme.

<sup>53</sup> Through another native Bengali speaker.

shape the meaning of what is being said (1 – 5). These speech acts take the form of implicit and explicit social cues, behaviours, utterances and physical displays to perform the narrative, using specific ‘rhetorical, persuasive properties... justifications... evaluations... and so on’ (Atkinson & Delamont, 2006: 166 – 167) to convey particular genres or feelings<sup>54</sup>. Augmenting the narrative with these sources of data further enriches the understanding that is gained, adding depth and nuance to my interpretation of the narrative.

This understanding is then placed within the broader discourse on *Muslims in the British Media*, questioning whether television representations utilise stereotypical tropes in the same way as all British media representations - to reinforce dominant norms. Beginning from transcriptions of the audio-recorded interviews and written up observation field notes, I employed a ‘funnel structure’ to redefine the research problem into workable findings, as Hammersley & Atkinson (1983) explain;

*‘Progressive focusing has two analytically distinct components. First, over time the research problem is developed or transformed, and eventually its scope is clarified and delimited and its internal structure explored. In this sense, it is frequently only over the course of the research that one discovers what the research is really ‘about’, and it is not uncommon for it to turn out to be something quite remote from the initially foreshadowed problems’ (175).*

The respondents’ initial affirmation of this representation lead me to explore how the Masoods are in fact a ‘good’ representation of British Muslim life, in turn questioning the literature on *Muslims in the British Media* from which I had based these assumptions<sup>55</sup>. The analysis remains categorised

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<sup>54</sup> For example, forming a disagreement as a rhetorical question rather than an outright statement changes it from an explicit to a more polite, indirect denial, despite the same thing being ‘said’ (see Stadler, 2011: 38).

<sup>55</sup> The implications of this are explored in the following chapter.

into its initial themes, but due to the limitations of the dissertation only the first category 'family/representation' is discussed here in detail<sup>56</sup>.

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<sup>56</sup> Whilst I do make reference to the second category, 'insider-outsider/power', and clip 2 its full analysis is not presented here. For the same reason, the third category 'culture/religion' has largely been left out.

# Reflective Considerations

Reflection has typically been the process of locating the researcher's biography, assumptions and personal values within the data analysis (DeVault, 1997: 218) to help establish its credibility, applicability and authenticity, as a measure of the findings trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985: 296 – 301; Guba & Lincoln, 1994: 114). Reflecting on the practicalities of *doing* the research is also necessary because method and analysis are 'reflexively interdependent and interconnected' (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003: 414). My reflections have been classified into three categories that have limited or changed the research in a particular way: Theoretical Assumptions, Gaining Access, and Managing Self.<sup>57</sup>

## *Theoretical Assumptions*

By theoretical assumptions I mean the assumptions that I made to initially problematize a question in which to research. This was conceived from the wider literature on *Muslims in the British Media*. However, reconciling these assumptions with the data gathered was problematic; undermining the credibility of the research direction by resisting the respondents own values (Lincoln & Guba, 1985: 296).

When approaching the subject of British Muslims in the broadcast media, I began from the position that the Masoods would be inherently problematic to British Muslims. This was grounded in the aforementioned literature which largely prescribes this as the case. The original research was therefore devised as an analysis of these characters based on the respondent's criticisms, identifying similar stereotyping trends in wider media formats that give rise to Islamophobic representations.

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<sup>57</sup> I used Primeau (2003) as the basis for this format, because it also produced narratives from 'the family' so encountered similar reflexive challenges.

However, both of the interviews completely reversed these expectations by accepting the Masoods as a good representation of British Muslim family life. As Dey (1993) warns, I was faced with the literature's assumptions blinding me to the evidence of the data (65), struggling to reconcile this revelation with the initial research questions that I had devised. Working with my supervisor, the research questions were re-envisioned from these reflections on the data, using the funnel method to determine my analytic procedures rather than impose them (Dey, 1993: 65). In this way, the research has been joint-constructed by the respondents, demonstrating its credibility by 'having an existence independent of the biographies of individual scientists' (Seale, 1999: 470).

### *Gaining Access*

Actually getting respondents provided serious challenges to me as a researcher penetrating the closed worlds of the professional community and British Muslim families. These perspectives are required to fully explore the discourse of these stereotypes, as constructions created by the producers made for these everyday consumers (Parry, 2011: 307). This limits what research can possibly be done, and the data that can be gathered, to hinder its wider applicability.

I first attempted to contact writers and producers of *Eastenders* that had created the Masood characters and storylines. Without any close contacts within the BBC I tried various frontline Email addresses and telephone numbers, but they declined to provide contact details<sup>58</sup>. I then pursued other lines of enquiry: their agents, social media sites, online blogs, and guessing BBC Email addresses, but was met with similar responses. After three weeks of enquiries, subsequent reminder Emails and phone calls I could not even get a statement from a professional. Gaining

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<sup>58</sup> See Appendix A for the Email template I used.

access to professionals is clearly problematic in a number of ways<sup>59</sup>, especially for researchers without relevant contacts.

Without this professional perspective I was unable to fully engage with the creative and research processes that inform the Masood's characterisation. For a television show, the producers are 'commodified sources of a particular aesthetic for audience (mass and/or critical) consumption' (Ursell, 2000: 818), embodying the creative processes that give rise to its characters and storylines. Their employment dictates not only what tropes are used but why, shedding light on how the BBC conceives 'real' British Muslim life (Ursell, 2000: 821 – 822). Whilst I have gone some way to compare key production resources, this is lacking in the analysis due to the scarcity of available material.

Interviewing British Muslim families also provided considerable challenges, both to making contact and within the interview. With a lack of contacts in Cardiff's Muslim communities, I initially made inquiries through an Islamic charity for which I volunteered. The success of this was only marginal, with most patrons either being non-Muslim or older Muslim women who largely refused to acknowledge me. The murder of Lee Rigby (22<sup>nd</sup> May 2013) and subsequent anti-Muslim backlash increased resistance severely, closing down contact with all but two potential respondents.<sup>60</sup> I therefore contacted an Undergraduate friend, with whom I have a good rapport and whose family I am known to, to use as my second set of respondents. Yet I continued to meet resistance from the parents of these families, who were reluctant to let an unknown, official-sounding person into their house (see Wenger, 2001: 263). Despite their familiarity, the parents maintained a level of mistrust throughout the interview, serving to mediate discussion to an extent and prevented further supplementary observations regarding their households.

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<sup>59</sup> Writers' and producers' schedules are a significant obstacle in themselves, cutting themselves off to meet intense deadlines for months on end (Tunstall, 1993: 2).

<sup>60</sup> A number of respondents actually cancelled organised interviews, usually saying 'it would not be appropriate'.

Access was problematic because it involved penetrating two closed worlds, with the parents acting as gatekeepers to place '*restrictions* on the kind of material which can be made available to the researcher' (Lee, 1993: 143). In a post 9/11 context, Bolgani (2007) argues that there is 'a general sense of mistrust towards people investigating issues concerning Muslims' in Britain' (281), requiring the researcher to negotiate access to the Muslim worlds where social meaning is formed. Families are amongst the most closed social groups (Daly, 2007: chapter 4), and for Muslim communities this can take on heightened significance as a 'central social institution' that provides emotional, cultural and religious stability reinforced through extensive kinship networks (Gilliat-Ray, 2010: 132 – 133). Access to the family as a whole was limited by these restrictions, resulting in, as Grillo (2008) puts, 'employing an ideal (European) model of the nuclear family' (16) where alternative cultural and moral imperatives could be misinterpreted or missed altogether (31 – 32). On the other hand, this in itself provided data by taking what I was not permitted to see as important socio-religious spaces and interactions for meaning (see Gilliat-Ray, 2005), adding further insight into what is shown on-screen and its attached importance.

### *Managing Self*

As these narratives are co-constructed between the researcher-respondent, its analysis must be sensitive to my voice both within the interview and within the representations produced from this. This lies at the heart of my postmodern methodology, which blurs the traditional boundaries between researcher-researched to place the researcher ontologically within the text (Ellis & Berger, 2003). Engaging in self-reflexivity enriches the text's authenticity by clearly showing when and how I reshape the respondent's narrative (Fontana, 2003: 54 – 55).

Although this research did not involve long-term contact with the respondents, because I was entering a very private world I thought it necessary to consider how I would conduct myself

during the interview. I replicated Primeau's (2003) conduct to entering the home<sup>61</sup>; an absence of threat and self-disclosure (10), in an attempt to establish an immediate rapport. I greeted the family warmly and was careful to maintain personal space and deference to undermine any sense of threat. I also brought a few boxes of chocolates as a gift for the families, which was used as an ice breaker and immediately gave a 'generous' air. I then began by re-emphasising the initial research statement to highlight the value of their personal experiences, and also reiterated the ethical consent procedures to reinforce their control over the situation.

Overcoming the respondent's sense of threat and mistrust enriches the authenticity of the account by promoting an unfettered dialogue with the interviewer (Fontana, 2003: 54). This allowed their voice to emerge naturally, rather than anxiously, within the text. As Adler & Adler highlight (2001), when the interview context is more comfortable the hierarchical gap between researcher-researched is diminished (529), facilitating the co-construction of the narrative for the respondent.

I also considered my physical appearance; going clean shaven and wearing casual clothes to establish myself as a student. This not only served to further alleviate any sense of 'threat' and 'officialness', but reflected my own biography within the text. As a young, male student I naturally gravitated towards the young, male respondents in the families, whom I had initially made contact with and who were also students. Although I made a conscious effort to direct questions to the whole group, within the transcripts it is clear that the accounts are primarily given through the sons' voices.

Biography therefore extends to the researcher's own body, which has a 'direct role in *knowing*' from the various characteristics ascribed to it (McGuire, 1990: 286, quoted in Gilliat-Ray, 2010: 415). The construction of myself as a young male is reflected through the analysis by the overarching sense of patriarchy within the narrative; particularly where the parents remained

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<sup>61</sup> Again, Primeau's experiences were used for their relevance and because they also clearly express how the family interacted with her, which was very reassuring as a novice interviewer preparing to "enter the breach".

authoritative as gatekeepers. Whilst this is not necessarily problematic, where British Muslim families remain structured by cultural notions of patriarchal family honour (Afshar, 2003: 129 - 130), this has been heightened in the respondent's voice. For Purewal (2003) this can go too far, conflating patriarchy and general Muslim culture to interpret women as subjects of misogyny (141 – 142). However, I clearly remained (and felt) an outsider as a white, non-Muslim, unrelated individual, with an interest in their 'mundane' experiences. My voice therefore reflects this interest as an outsider looking in, acting in a supporting role to push 'the narrator's voice into the limelight... creating a self-reflective and respectful distance between the researcher's and narrators' voices' (Chase, 2005: 665). Authenticity is incorporated into the analysis by maintaining this distance, helping to delineate my interpretation and their words.

## Assessing the representation: ‘stereotype’ or ‘parody’?

British Muslim representation is problematic, according to the literature, as it essentially lacks grounding in their ‘real’ experiences. These representations instead serve to ‘parody’ them, reinforcing the pre-existing power-hierarchy of the dominant ‘self’. The first question, then, is whether the Masood family reflects the ‘lived’ experiences of British Muslims. This is largely found to be the case, correlating with the narrative constructed from the interview and being explicitly affirmed by the respondents themselves;

Interviewer: Having watched the show, do you feel these characters do a good or bad job at representing British Muslims as a family, can you relate to them in terms of family life and the storylines?

Vijay (son): Yeah, definitely, we have the same problems – should we go Mosque or work or family commitments.

[Vijay speaks in Bengali to Rajendra (father) and Bharati (mother)]

Vijay: They think that they represent Muslim families very well. My parents agree with the problems and most of how its done.

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Interviewer: So overall, to what extent do you feel that the Masoods represent yourselves as a family? And maybe British Muslims as a whole?

Mohammad (father): Thinking about what we’ve said I reckon they do show what its like to be a British Muslim family. [Chuckles to himself] But I’m not sure what its like for other families as were a bit different, more relaxed? But they [The Masoods] are not a very traditional family either, so maybe.

The following analysis elaborates on these statements, assessing the Masoods’ construction against the respondents’ performance in the interview and from my position as an outsider. Specifically, I focus on patriarchy and its place within the character’s behaviour and through the use of visual imagery. Approaching from a post-structuralist perspective, its success is dependent on whether the representation empowers these cultural practices or diminishes them against the dominant norm.

## *Cultural Identification*

*Eastenders* draws upon a number of cultural tropes to immediately establish the Masoods as Muslim, but these tropes remain relevant to the British context the families are in. The introductory scene 'Masoods move onto the square' clearly identifies these tropes by using dinner time as a space to establish important cultural practices and power-dynamics within the home. This is necessary as these practices may well be alien to the audience, who are predominantly the dominant white, British 'self'. When discussing this scene, the respondents instantly recognised its use in this way by relating to the importance of dinner within their home;

Interviewer: Why do you think this scene was put in there as the first proper introduction?

Vijay (son): Umm, to show what sort of family they are. Umm how they interact and, personally I think they are waiting for their son, maybe they haven't seen him in a little while and... that's how they are trying to introduce them to us.

Interviewer: Do you think this represents the family dynamic [Rajendra (father) shows affirmation as I am talking], like is this what happens every day?

Vijay: Yeah, I mean were no different from other families, people come in late from work and others things.

[Bharati (mother) who is nodding and wants to speak]

Vijay: If she speaks in Bengali is it ok to translate?

Interviewer: Yeah that's fine

[Vijay asks question and translates]

Vijay: Yeah my Mum agrees, she says its very similar. Its important not to miss dinner.

Dinner was an especially important time for the Thakar family, conveyed here by the son's use of his own experience from missing dinner (and possibly being reprimanded) in the past. Its importance is shared by Hopkin's (2006) respondents as a rare time for focus on family and religion (348). The affirmation of the parents reinforces this further, emulating Zainab's (the mother) on-screen reluctance to begin without their eldest son. For them, the highly ritualised environment of dinner is an opportunity for the socialization of appropriate cultural practices within their children (Blum-Kulka, 1997: 223 -224).

Blum-Kulka (1997) elaborates on this process of socialisation through the parents enacting various forms of linguistic control to establish clear familial roles (chapter 5). Similar speech acts

were implicit within the interview and clearly frame the respondent's voice within the narrative, although to a much larger extent in the Thakar family, as the following extract highlights;

Interviewer: And just going back to the family life, the Mother does a lot of the talking [Rajendra (father) and Bharati (mother) laugh] and the sons seem quite reserved, does this feel familiar to you?

Rajendra: Yes.

[Bharati nods]

Vijay (son): Well, I say my Mum and Dad are the head of the family, and that's quite common in most Asian families. They're given the highest respect in the culture and that's inbred in any Asian family, and then it's the eldest. So yeah I'd say that's right yeah [Rajendra and Bharati are nodding in agreement]. Yeah my Dad agrees.

Highlighted by the explicit reference to these roles by the Thakars, the Masoods' parental roles are constructed to represent the typical patriarchal Muslim family in a number of comparable linguistic ways. Masood Ahmed (the father) always sits at the head of the table and is constantly sought approval from in conversation on the concerns typically raised by Zainab Masood (the mother). He usually does not have to raise his voice to achieve this, saying very few words in a soft manner to steer the course of the conversation and if his voice is raised a chastising silence is normally followed. As the previous extract alludes to, Zainab's (the mother) role is defined in contrast to this; often trying to impose control over Tamwar and Syed (the sons) through shouting and quarrelling<sup>62</sup>. The mother's authority is constructed through her nurturing role, shown by her conversational engagement concerning their daily experiences (see Kendall, 2008), whilst the father's impassive aloofness reflects his role as dominant overseer (Gleason, 1975: 291). In an interview discussing the contentious 'Syed's Gay Turmoil' storyline, actor Nitin Ganatra (Masood Ahmed) explains how this was conceived in the character's creative development;

*'At first, it's not about what Syed's going through at all. It's about how it makes the family look. It's a very different dilemma to Zainab's. She's a reactive character, whereas Masood's pointing out that there's a bigger picture. Although*

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<sup>62</sup> Blum-Kulka's (1997) quantitative analysis really illuminates this difference, with mothers contributing twice as much to dinner-time conversation than fathers (Table 3.1, 59 - 61).

*Zainab appears to be the head of the household, they come from a patriarchal background. It's up to the father of the family to sort situations like this out - and in their culture, you're left with two choices: reject him or be rejected as a family. The whole community could turn on the Masoods' (Green, 2010).*

In this way, *Eastenders'* representation empowers a very real cultural relationship found within British Muslim families. Gilliat-Ray (2010) establishes the difference in roles succinctly;

*'if the breadwinner role is the primary responsibility of men, women are first and foremost responsible for (and ideally respected for) the part they play as mothers in the transmission of values, and the religious education of the next generation' (133).*

Whilst the roles have a different emphasis, each is respected in their own right within the family. A portrayal that didn't recognise this difference would disenfranchise British Muslim culture, marginalising the gendered cultural framework which shapes their meaning making process.

### *Visual Imagery*

These patriarchal roles are also present visually, but construct a more 'moderate' representation of the British Muslim family. Visual markers are significant in media discourses on patriarchy, especially clothing, as a site for discussion of the oppression of women (Macdonald, 2006: 7 – 11; Watson, 1994: 151 - 153). Whilst it is not the purpose of this chapter to discuss these claims, it establishes the fact that Muslim visual imagery is especially loaded with cultural value. In turn, British Muslim culture can be marginalised or empowered through its visual representation (Mancini, 2012: 412 – 413).

Keeping with the previous discussion around dinner time, the dining room and living room are both cultural spaces where these power-dynamics are performed. As the patriarchal head of the

household, Masood Ahmed (the father) is shown to occupy the top seat of the table<sup>63</sup> flanked by the rest of the family<sup>64</sup>. As can be seen in figures 1 and 2, both fathers occupied the ‘head’ of the living room; sitting in their own comfy chairs with the best view of the television, whilst the other members of the family shared couches<sup>65</sup>. This encapsulates the linear flow of authority that would be present down the dinner table; the father is the ‘primary recipient’ of responses, either before or after the initial statement, who’s judgement is supported by the Mother and articulated to their children as subjects to this (Ochs & Taylor, 2009: 104 – 109)<sup>66</sup>. Such was the power of these controls that it even influenced my voice as a young researcher positioned at the opposite end of the room, where gradually through the interview I found myself qualifying responses by drawing upon the father’s experiences<sup>67</sup>.

Wider observations of the respondents’ living arrangements aesthetically correlated with that on-screen, supporting the cultural context of a stereotypical working class South Asian family in a coherent fashion (see Appadurai, 1986: 14 – 15). Both the families lived in terraced houses on residential streets, much like the Masoods, indicating that they represent the same socio-economic strata. The furnishings are similarly modest, but in my observations I was drawn to the prevalence of photographs in the room: of their children’s academic successes, pictures of family (I assumed), and on at least one wall was a framed ‘Asian’ landscape or pattern. Although the Masood’s living room is not adorned with family pictures<sup>68</sup>, generic framed works and wallpaper of eastern pattern adorn the walls in an attempt to capture these landscapes of a pre-migratory ‘home’ (see figure 4). Tolia-Kelly (2004) explains how these types of images are important contextually; ‘the values and

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<sup>63</sup> A Western stereotypical seat of power (Dreyer & Dreyer, 1973: 294).

<sup>64</sup> For Dreyer & Dreyer (1973) these positions hold no real significant importance and are fairly interchangeable (294), although the seat to the right of the head is sometimes associated as a position of honour.

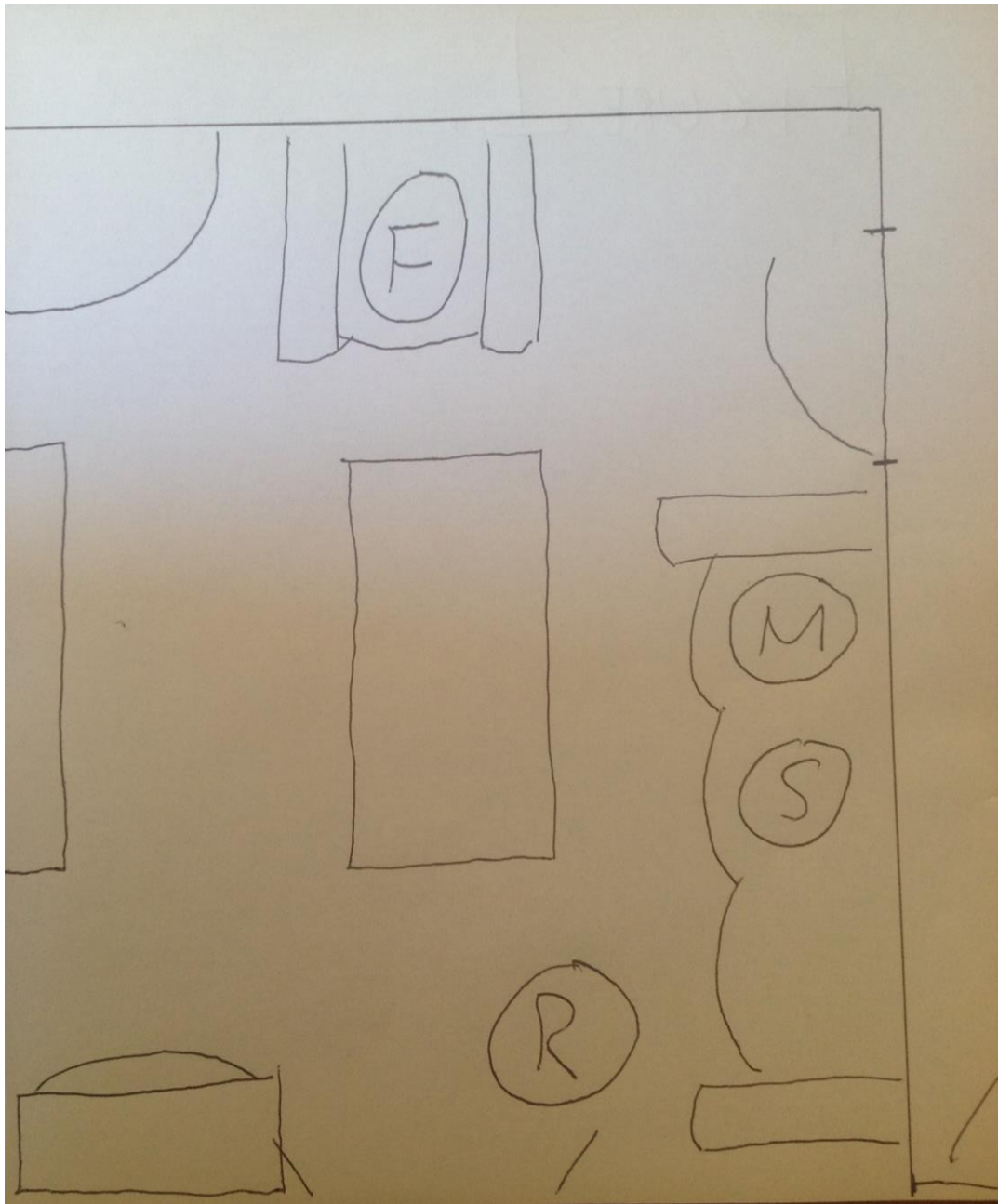
<sup>65</sup> See figure 3 for how a similar living room dynamic has been used to visually frame the Masoods.

<sup>66</sup> Against figure 2 I have tried to convey this by annotating on part of the interview. The extract was in the latter stages of the interview.

<sup>67</sup> Notice in figure 2 that I focus on the father’s reaction and unwittingly direct the question to him, despite it clearly being an open question.

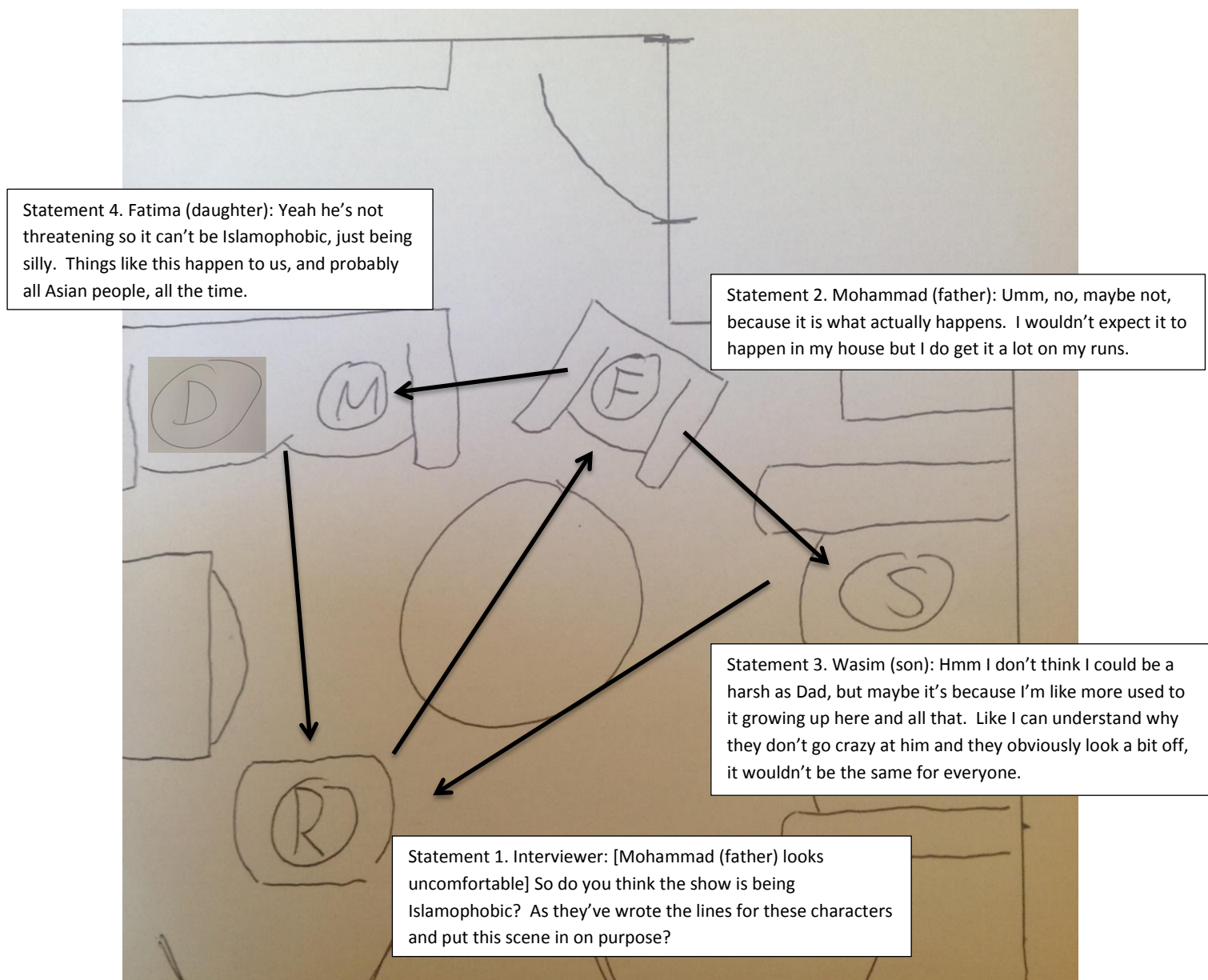
<sup>68</sup> This is not an accidental omission but refers to Zainab’s (the mother) troubling past experiences in Pakistan, coupled with the fact the sons have not achieved particular academic success.

meanings assigned to these visual cultures indicate... landscapes of belonging, which are critical in securing an enfranchised space of 'home' (681).



**Figure 1. Thakar family living room.**

**F = Father, M = Mother, S = Son, R = Researcher**



**Figure 2. Khalid family living room.**

**D = Daughter, M = Mother, F = Father, S = Son, R = Researcher**



**Figure 3. (BBC Eastenders, 2013) Masoods in Living Room**



**Figure 4. (Connolly, 2010) Masoods' eastern aesthetic.**

As cultural identity 'becomes clear through various attributes, e.g., how they talk, behave and dress' (Bari, 2005: 107), the way the Masood's are physically portrayed should also be comparable to the respondents. However, through the interview this was identified as a topic of contention, as Zahia Khalid (mother) put; 'you couldn't tell even from the clip [whether] they were non-Muslim Asians'. In the respondent's voice there is a clear disparity between the expected portrayal of a Muslim family and how the respondents actually portrayed themselves. I found that for the males this was unproblematic, as both the respondents and on-screen characters were wearing everyday British clothes and not appearing 'outwardly' religious. On the other hand, across both families there were three women present and all wore *hijabs* of varying styles, along with 'eastern cloth'<sup>69</sup>. Zainab (the mother) eschews the veil even in public and her style of dress can be described as interchangeable between eastern and western, suited accordingly to the context of the scene. Here the creative process marginalises the cultural expectations of the respondents, moving away from the *hijab* to visually establish the character as a 'strong-willed woman' (AIM, 2007). Kirmani (2009) argues that this treatment is a false projection because 'bans and limitations placed on the right to wear the veil can be regarded as an attempt to inscribe on Muslim women the receiving society's moral system' (50).

Despite these visual shortcomings, it is clear that patriarchy is used as a trope to define the central characterisation of the Masoods. Although patriarchy is a trope often recycled to depict Muslim families, the respondents' narratives are also performed along a patriarchal Muslim family framework. Therefore, *Eastenders'* representation is an example of a 'good' stereotype and not a parody, by being grounded in the 'lived' experiences of the British Muslim family. Their cultural differences are empowered in the face of the norm, and the proceeding discussion considers how this deconstructs the prevailing notions of Islamophobia.

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<sup>69</sup> To borrow a term used when I was volunteering in an Islamic charity shop, used to denote Eastern style clothing.

# Questioning Islamophobia

Although *Eastenders'* representation is grounded in this way, the use of patriarchy remains a source of 'parody' within the wider media. Meer (2006) sums up the naïve approach to patriarchy taken by British print-intellectuals;

*'they are 'eager to condemn a pervasive "Islamic sexism – whether it be arranged marriages, headscarves, limiting career options" or "female circumcision" to which we "cannot give ground in the name of multiculturalism". Along with other print media journalists... fear that Muslims are currently at odds with something integral to life in Britain, if not modernity itself' (36).*

For the academic literature, then, the British media's use of patriarchy is inherently an Islamophobic trope within British Muslim representation. It is constructed in the press to portray self-segregation and backwardness against the West's morally 'enlightened' nucleic family (see Toynbee, 2004)<sup>70</sup>. By using a rehearsed stereotype<sup>71</sup> patriarchy fuels Islamophobia towards British Muslims; it 'simultaneously serves to inform dominant norms and reassure exclusive accounts of belonging' (Meer, 2006: 53) whilst overtly condemning their ideology as a threat to British freedom (Carland, 2011).

However, for Santer (executive producer) cultural empathy lay at the heart of the Masood's creative development; 'the dynamics of Muslim relationships and families are not radically different from any others but the importance that Muslim culture places on family and married life can make the same issues seem more charged' (Holmwood & McLean, 2009). The patriarchal trope acts as a vehicle through which the Masood's main storylines are created, presented as a moral dilemma

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<sup>70</sup> Where patriarchy is juxtaposed against the notion of choice as central to fit parenting (Hadfield, Rudoe & Sanderson-Mann, 2007).

<sup>71</sup> One based on recycled, out-dated public perceptions which claim no grounding in contemporary lived experience (Bramen, 2003: 125).

between the family's expectations and the agenda of other, external forces<sup>72</sup>. If this is to be the case, the cultural strictures imposed by patriarchy must present a legitimate challenge to the dominant norms in order to create this dilemma in the first place.

*Eastenders'* use of the dinner scene to introduce the Masoods demonstrates a cultural empathy which does not condemn their identity. This scene is immediately followed by a scene in the Queen Victoria pub that shows many of the lead white, British male characters drinking and socialising. Its juxtaposition is clearly meant to exacerbate the difference between the two cultures, which was picked upon particularly by the younger respondents who had more experience of both worlds;

Interviewer: So, thinking back to the clip, what do you think of the pub scene straight after? I saw that you both [Wasim and Fatima] were laughing when you saw it?

Wasim (son): It reminded me of Lancaster! [I laugh, we both studied together during my Undergraduate studies] It's what all English people do, the pub is like the place to be for English guys, and it's kinda like their dinner in the clip?

Fatima (daughter): Yeah, it's just not something we do. I mean we sometimes go out but we don't drink, and I won't hang around unless there's music and dancing. And especially for Mum and Dad, this wouldn't happen?

Mohammad (father): No.

Zahia (mother): As Fatima said it's not something that we do as Muslims, it is *haram* [A sinful act which is prohibited no matter the intention or the person (Al-Qaradawi, 1999: 26)].

Interviewer: Do you think they put it straight after for a reason?

Mohammad: From what my son [Vijay] has said and what I've seen it is a difference between an Asian family and a white family. For us dinner is a family time, and as my wife has said it [drinking] is wrong.

Apart from the obvious problems with drinking, what is poignant is the association of the pub being the 'British dining room'. Adopting the voice of my British Muslim respondents, this difference can be seen in such a way which casts a negative light on the dominant British characters, who are neglecting important family time and moral socialisation in favour of leisure. In doing so, *Eastenders* does not condemn the highly structured family culture as a threat to freedom but rather portrays it as 'just something they do not do' (to paraphrase the daughter's response).

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<sup>72</sup> 'Syed's Gay turmoil' and 'Masood's turn to gambling' are both main storylines which are essentially constructed on the dynamic.

Yet even empathetic constructions inherently exhort the Muslim as the modern ‘bogeyman’ wherever stereotypes are used (Abukhattala, 2004). Muslim villains have become adept at blending in through the medium of television; as the neighbour, shop owner or taxi driver (Sanchez, 2010: 3 – 11). Hiding in plain sight, the Muslim now represents a covert, insipid threat ‘reminding the ego that it is never wholly sovereign’ (Kearney, 2009: 3). The decision to portray Zainab (the mother) as a ‘strong independent woman’ can be read in this way, prompting her ‘bodily’ portrayal to be tempered by the norms of western dress. Here eastern dress becomes synonymous with women’s oppression and an internal threat to British popular culture, despite it actually worn by British Muslim women every day. Therefore, the literature applies the same static reading even to these culturally empathetic stereotypical expressions, working on the same assumption that ‘fear is reproduced precisely by the threat that such bodies ‘may pass (us) by’’ (Mirza, 2013: 6).

The problem with this static approach is that the literature treats all grounded representations homogeneously, so whilst this may be true for some media formats, even when British Muslims relate to the representation it is still read as Islamophobic. The second clip, ‘Antony has dinner with the Masoods’, is a deliberate representation of microaggressive Islamophobia<sup>73</sup>. The assumptions portrayed in the clip clearly resonate with the experiences of the respondents;

[Clip 2 – Anthony meets the Masoods – plays for 3 minutes]

Interviewer: What do you think of the assumptions he makes, you [Mohammad] seemed a bit in disbelief at what he was saying?

Mohammad (father): As a taxi driver I get a lot of things said to me like ‘How’s Pakistan?’ or when a fare starts talking about curry. I know they don’t know, and most of the time they’re drunk, but they always think that I’m from Pakistan and can eat hot curries, just like he said. It must be what all English people think we are.

Wasim (son): Yeah I think we all agree with Dad, you’ve seen at Uni during Fresher’s Week and that when people come up to me and be like ‘Are you Indian?’, and I’m like no ‘No I’m from Leicester’. It makes me laugh.

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<sup>73</sup> ‘Subtle forms of discrimination (often unintentional and unconscious) that send negative and denigrating messages to members of marginalized racial groups’ (Nadal et al., 2012: 15 – 16).

Although it draws upon stereotypical Islamophobic assumptions (see Nadal et al.'s 6 point coda, 2012: 17 - 18), merely portraying Islamophobia roots the Masoods as a static representation in opposition to this. The literature can therefore criticise the portrayal of Islamophobia as a source of Islamophobia itself, suggesting that their tolerance of Antony's assumptions conveys the notion that they should not feel victimised<sup>74</sup>. Poole's (2002) analysis is replete with this double-standard, criticising *The Guardian's* use of 'shared social scripts by which Muslims have become to be known – women and their clothing, the Rushdie affair, Muslim schools and fundamentalism' (134). But it is only through these 'shared social scripts' that meaningful representations can be created, as a conceptual framework to render British Muslim experience intelligible to the 'self' audience (Dyer, 1993: chapter 2). To even embark on this research I had to begin from shared assumptions of British Muslim culture from which to build a narrative, which in this case it turned out to disprove.

As a result, the pervasiveness of microaggressive Islamophobia, actual or perceived, leads the literature to conflate all cultural difference as homogeneously problematic. This results in incredibly generalized, sweeping criticisms of media representations<sup>75</sup> that similarly rely on gross parodies of British Muslims, in which to ground its criticisms. Sanchez (2010) states this very point; reading '*a static stereotype* would endorse a monolithic production of a character that reduces the concept of cultural difference to a mere tokenistic visualization' (2). Yet the Masoods defy identification as either the 'Arab terrorist' or the 'threatening immigrant', instead representing 'multifaceted actors negotiating within particular social contexts' that challenge stable identity markers (Kirmani, 2009: 50). Thus, the preoccupation with the 'Arab terrorist' and the 'threatening immigrant' reflects a static reading of the British Muslim within the literature,

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<sup>74</sup> Dr. Moosavi highlighted this during the CSI-UK's 2013 *Public Lecture Series*, saying that he was amazed when his Muslim respondent's would casually mention Islamophobic 'jokes' with non-Muslim peers without associating it as Islamophobic. This casual tolerance is also present in the respondents' narratives, where these assumptions 'make them laugh' (to paraphrase Wasim).

<sup>75</sup> Such as that 'negative representations of Muslims and Islam were an ingredient of all selections of the media' (Allen, 2010: 96).

rendering itself unable to meaningfully deconstruct these parodies by purporting a dissolution of all British Muslim cultural tropes.

Rather than seeking dissolution, I posit that the literature should seek to employ a new reading of British Muslim media representations that can empower their specific cultural practices. Where the monolithic static stereotype smothers difference, ‘*a dynamic stereotype*’ would foster a new and different interpretation that would go beyond that set of fixed standards, therefore seeking to display a new depiction about that recurrent and preceding cliché’ (Sanchez, 2010: 2). Through empowering difference in an empathetic way the power-hierarchies present in Islamophobic representations can be deconstructed, as Kincheloe argues;

*‘Because of its transformative power, difference... must be not only tolerated but also cultivated as a spark to human solidarity and creativity. As I have written elsewhere, educators who value difference often begin their analysis... by listening to those who have suffered most as a result of its existence. These different ways of seeing allow... other individuals access to new modes of cognition – a cognition of empathy. Such a perspective allows individuals access to tacit modes of racism, cultural bias, and religious intolerance that operate to structured worldviews’* (paraphrased, emphasis in the original.

2004: 2 – 3).

This creative process has already been employed in *Eastenders* by Santer (executive producer), revisiting the British Muslim family to construct the Masoods in a fresh, dynamic way. The Ferreria family, their representational predecessor, were an utter failure with British Muslim consumers because they simply recycled the same, rehearsed Islamophobic parody of the British Muslim stereotype. The Masoods begin from the same tropes, such as patriarchy, which are found to be grounded in the ‘lived’ attributes ascribed by British Muslim families

themselves. But this gives way to a fresh construction of the British Muslim family by portraying their difference in a way which moves beyond the cultural expectations of the dominant 'self'<sup>76</sup>. For example, clip 2 subverts the 'self/other' power-hierarchy by representing Antony (the boyfriend) as subject to the culture of the Masoods. He is shown trying to gain the acceptance of Zainab and Masood (the parents) by complying with their culture, but his Islamophobic assumptions about Indian food make him look ridiculous. The following extract shows how this constructs a fresh perception of family life by using traditional stereotypes to subvert contemporary events;

Vijay (son): Umm, well it looks like he was trying to incorporate them, so the way Zainab said 'Let's play Ludo!' was the thought that they'd had enough [of Anthony]...[Bharati (mother) speaks] This wouldn't happen going back 10 or 20 years, that's not something that a non-asian person would do; come around to an Asian persons house or vice-versa. So things have definitely changed, and like they're trying to incorporate everything.

Interviewer: What about some of the things he said, particularly the 'Pakistani cooking' quote?

[All laugh]

Vijay: Yeah assuming we're all Pakistani [Rajendra (father) nods in agreement]. Well maybe he's trying to put them more at ease or trying to learn, by trying to sound like he's just one of them like.

By deconstructing the cultural expectations of its wider, dominant British audience, *Eastenders* undermines the legitimacy of the 'permission to hate' espoused by the 'Islamophobic' British media (Poynting & Mason, 2006: 367). The Masoods, as a stereotypical representation, exist outside the generalised discourses in the literature by clearly not fitting the 'Arab terrorist' or 'threatening immigrant' stereotypes, despite drawing upon the same cultural tropes. Therefore, it cannot meaningfully be considered Islamophobic in any way; neither 'parodying' British Muslims nor serving the agenda of the dominant culture.

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<sup>76</sup> Evidence of this success is shown by the extremely positive reception by ethnic minority consumers and British critics, leading to their own celebrity status and central storylines (Fulton, 2009). This is has also been demonstrated through my interviews, in which the respondents' narratives reflect a reading and performance that emulates their on-screen representation.

It follows that these stereotypes cannot be homogenously problematic *in themselves*, as the literature claims, but that it is dependent on how these stereotypes are framed. As the ‘medium is the message’ (McLuhan, 1967), Islamophobia must be seen in terms of the different media formats in which it inhabits. This is because different media formats physically and cognitively determine what can possibly be constructed within it, and so define its construction of British Muslim stereotypes (Mortensen, 2008: 379 – 382).

This becomes apparent when contrasting the cognitive processes behind television broadcast media and the print media, which necessitate totally different narrative styles based on its physical limitations. The soap opera; designed to be ‘potentially never-ending’ (Lacey, 2000: 38), has the physical narrative space to ‘connect with experiences and recognisable emotions and situations from the lives of the audience’ (Hobson, 2003: 202). Conversely, the print media; limited by the number of pages within a hardcopy, ‘favour... institutions and nations... more stories about these power elites, special focus on negative, conflictual or dramatic events’ (van Dijk, 1989: 203) to grab attention within its significantly smaller narrative confines.

With this in mind, the Masood’s success can be plausibly explained by that it has significantly more narrative space in which to elaborate upon British Muslim cultural tropes, whilst the print media struggles because this means less physical space to actually produce the news.

‘Islamophobia’ is also constructed in this small space in relation to media representation<sup>77</sup>, leading to the literature’s preoccupation with the ‘Arab terrorist’ and the ‘threatening immigrant’ as reproducing the ideologies of the elites (Khatib, 2012: 5). My critique of the literature is well-founded if this is the case, as its sweeping problematisations stem from a very specific, limited grounding in the media as a whole.

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<sup>77</sup> Where print media is the most widely researched of different media formats.

## Concluding Remarks: Questions, Implications and Limitations

Through this research I have illuminated a problematic assumption at the heart of *Muslims in the British Media* literature. The research is significant because it calls for a new approach to the analysis of media representations of British Muslims; one that differentiates between the media formats in which they are constructed. By analysing media stereotypes from the constructed narratives of British Muslims themselves, *Eastenders* Masood family is found to be a *dynamic stereotype* that is grounded in their 'lived' experiences. In this way, the *dynamic stereotype* deconstructs the discourse of Islamophobia within the media text by empowering cultural difference, resting largely outside the purview of the current literature on *Muslims in the British Media*. Reassuringly, Runnymede's (2013) latest publication indicates the need for a *dynamic* reading of British Muslims; seeking to 'counter the dominant understandings of British Muslim identities where these are based on falsehoods and generalizations, and to highlight the complexities, nuances and diversity of identities among Muslims in Britain' (Berkeley, 2013: 2), despite it still employing the monolithic 'mainstream' media (Meer, 2013: 10). Due to this significance, I believe that this warrants further research and I would be interested in pursuing this for further study to broaden out these initial, exploratory findings.

This research focus was not foreseen and is an almost complete reversal of my original research question. My inability to reconcile the primary data with the theoretical assumptions in the literature caused me to reverse my expectations from what the literature could achieve. In lieu of this grounding I had to begin from the primary data; the 'lived' experiences of British Muslims as constructed in the narratives of the two British Muslim families. Thus, the analysis is constructed from the data to develop the current research question.

## *Implications*

To fully answer this question I advocate further research which adopts a new methodological approach to reading stereotypes of British Muslims. As has been shown in chapter 5, the literature draws upon the same *static stereotypes* of British Muslims as the British media; primarily the 'Arab terrorist' and the 'threatening immigrant'. All empathy to the 'actual' differences<sup>78</sup> of British Muslim culture are dissolved in the face of a monolithic reading, replicating their supposed treatment in the media's representations. Subsequently, I argue that the literature struggles to actually deconstruct the power-hierarchies that it is criticising by not offering any alternatives or actually empowering British Muslim culture.

More specifically, this involves a change in the foundational assumptions of the literature in two ways. Firstly, the literature must show more awareness that their research is limited to a certain media type. As shown in the literature review, most of the work pertaining specifically to British media representation lies within print media. This is a very particular type of media format that frames the text from its unique physical and cognitive constraints and from this produces uniquely formed representations. In the contemporary world, where there is a constantly evolving myriad of media formats inhabited by British Muslims<sup>79</sup>, it is a substantial leap to problematize one media format and then impose this on all other popular media formats. Broadcast television, especially the soap opera, is different as it involves a distinct creative process; focussing on everyday life to 'blend in' the Muslim.

Accordingly, this is a significant gap in the literature. More work is severely needed looking at created British Muslim representations in other popular television programmes, such as *Coronation Street*, which have similar creative goals. This could extend to older television series

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<sup>78</sup> Not as essential attributes but attributes expected and performed by British Muslims themselves.

<sup>79</sup> Especially in cyberspace (see Varisco, 2010; Bunt, 2009).

which overtly portray Islamophobic parodies, to compare the creative processes of these contemporary shows and identify any problematic similarities.

Secondly, there needs to be an acceptance that stereotypes are necessary cognitive devices in the creative process of these representations. New approaches to Orientalism argue that these stereotypes are necessary for the 'self' to come to terms with the multiplicity of the 'other'. Consequently, it does not follow that the use of stereotypes is inherently Islamophobic. Future work could revisit supposed 'Islamophobic' stereotypes, to assess, as I have done, the extent to which they are actually grounded and accepted by British Muslims.

### *Limitations*

As an exploratory study, the purpose of this dissertation is to introduce my challenge to the wider literature's foundational assumptions. I believe that this has been achieved, posing a question that has been shown to be plausible and significant to the current field. My theoretical underpinnings: Orientalism and Islamophobia, logically flow throughout the design to analysis, and tie together methodologically by drawing upon the same works prevalent in the wider literature. My use of video and setting in the interview was also very useful to eliciting natural narratives when researching in a closed community, especially as a novice researcher. For this reason, I feel this dissertation is also of methodological interest to other sociologists.

However, the research project is lacking in a number of areas, limited by the restraints of the dissertation format and my own lack of experience. I feel that this is the dissertation's main shortcoming. In the following paragraphs I will set out the ways in which I would re-focus my studies should I be granted the opportunity to conduct the study again, in order to improve the applicability of the data gathered.

The analysis is distinctly lacking a professional voice simply due to the lack of resources, both in terms of access and available material. This is definitely missing in the analysis as a counter-point to the respondent's own creative construction in their account. Although I have included the creative process behind the Masoods' in the analysis it is somewhat ungrounded, drawing mostly on interviews from the actors and a couple of important producers. Given the sheer number of creative staff involved in the show this is far from a comprehensive account. For this reason, the analysis lacks insight into the actual creative process of how the characters are conceived; what research occurs, what creative tensions exist, and what are the established underlying motivations behind the Masoods' characterisation.

This is compounded by a lack of data longitudinally. Although I have tried to ensure the voice of the respondent's shines through in my analysis, it still merely rests on two semi-structured interviews. Thus, it cannot be said to be truly representative of the British Muslim opinion of *Eastenders'* representation. Whilst I am keen to state that their performance should not be treated as homogeneous for all British Muslims, the practice of patriarchy has assumed to be. The research can clearly be criticised for this reason; adopting a homogenous trope of British Muslims and then using this to criticise the literature's use of homogeneous, *static* stereotypes. If done again, I would incorporate a quantitative survey to gain a more substantive account of the opinion of British Muslims on *Eastenders'* representation, in order to further validate the claim that it is a 'good' stereotype. This would improve the overall applicability of the research findings.

Finally, I would include much more analysis of the second and third categories of discussion, which were omitted simply due to the word count. Clip 2, 'Antony has lunch with the Masoods', is particularly important as it subverts the traditional 'self/other' hierarchy. Examples of this in the literature are scarce at best, usually in research on Muslim comedians which often subvert expectations as a comic play. Its inclusion would serve to demonstrate how a dynamic approach deconstructs Islamophobia in more lucid way.

# Appendix

## Appendix A: Generic BBC Email

To NAME,

I am writing to ask for your valued time and experience as a POSITION for *Eastenders*, through an interview: either face-to-face, through Skype, or over the phone.

I am currently a Jameel Scholarship student, studying a Masters in Islam in Contemporary Britain at Cardiff University's Centre for the Study of Islam – UK. For my end of year dissertation I want to consider the representation of British Muslims in narrative television media. Whilst much work has been done on British Muslim representation in the media, this has largely been focused on print media and limited to news and documentaries. Therefore, this research is pioneering in opening up a new avenue of study into Muslims in the UK.

*Eastenders*, as the flagship television show for the BBC, is an incredibly important producer of cultural knowledge; one in which comments and informs British identity. However, given recent controversies of fair representation of Muslims in the wider British media and criticisms of the BBC's internal governance, it is extremely pertinent to consider the way this soap opera represents British Muslims. The way Muslim characters have been created within the *Eastenders*' world is at the heart of the matter. As a result, your experiences in the creative process of these characters are of paramount importance to this research.

If you would like to be part of this research project or require more information, please respond to this email or by telephone. Due to pressing deadlines a response in the coming week would be very much appreciated.

Many thanks,

Matthew Vince

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