Muslim Women in Hip-Hop

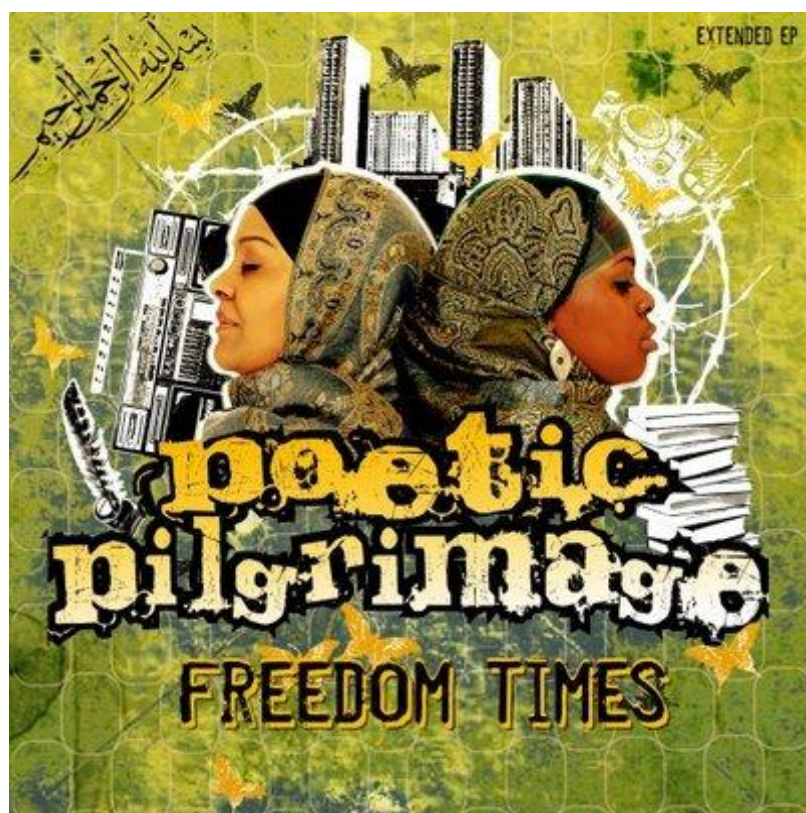## An Ethnographic Study of 'Poetic Pilgrimage'

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Abstract

Muslim women involved in hip-hop… really? The very thought of Muslim women being engaged in such a music genre is seen by some as a threat to the traditional gender roles within Islamic tradition. However, the idea that the female voice is to be restricted to the private sphere is increasingly being challenged by Muslim artists who are using hip-hop as a space in which to express themselves but also educate their audience. Using the example of Poetic Pilgrimage, this study explores their lives and challenges through ethnographic research including the use of in-depth interviewing and direct observation. The paper will show how Poetic Pilgrimage are successfully using hip-hop to articulate their various identities, whilst being confronted with racism and sexism from both the Muslim and non-Muslim community.

<u>Acknowledgements</u>

Contents

Introduction

The aim of this ethnographic study is to look at the experiences of one female British Muslim hip-hop group called Poetic Pilgrimage in detail. The study will utilise qualitative research methods including participant observation and in-depth interviewing in order to gain an understanding of the lives, and challenges faced by the group, which consists of two women, Sukina Abdul Noor and Muneera Rashida. In order to do this, I will begin by analysing previous literature surrounding the issue of Muslim women in hip-hop, and then move on to outlining the methodology that will be employed when carrying out this study. This will also include exploring its limitations in addition to discussing reflexivity during the research process. In the final chapter, I will be examine the research findings and analyse their implications not only in relation to the female Muslim experience in hip-hop, but also how it relates to the Muslim experience of identity construction as a whole.

Sukina and Muneera of Poetic Pilgrimage are both converts to Islam who describe themselves as 'using hip-hop as a means of communication… and building bridges between communities'.[1] They have been noted as being one of the 'best known underground Hip-Hop acts in the whole of Europe'[2] and so to understand them better, it is vital that we look at hip-hop, its relationship with Muslims and how it has become 'the idiom for minority youth and urban activism'[3] across the globe.

Journalist Henry Allen once famously stated that 'Islam is hip-hop's official religion'[4] and indeed from its emergence as a form of cultural expression in the 1970's, there has always been an intricate relationship between Muslims and hip-hop. It is claimed that 'Muslim influence was at the ground floor of hip-hop' because it 'came from the streets, from the toughest neighbourhoods, and that's always

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[1] My Interview with Muneera conducted on the 17th July 2011.
[2] Michael Mumisa 'Sacred tunes' (Al-Ahram Weekly, 2006)
[3] Hisham Aidi 'Verily, There Is Only One Hip-Hop Umma: Islam, Cultural Protest and Urban Marginality' *Socialism and Democracy Online* (S&D, 2004) p.15.
[4] Harry Allen 'Righteous Indignation: Rappers Talk about the Strength and of Hip-Hop and Islam' *The Source* (1991) p.48.

where the Muslims were'[5] and thus the music genre is said to have evolved from the 'wretched social and economic conditions of the inner city'.[6] Subsequently, early hip-hop movements were strongly associated with the development of Black identity and nationalism and groups such as the Nation of Islam[7], and the Five Percent Nation[8] contributed greatly to 'shaping its current form'.[9] Teachings from both movements were incorporated into hip-hop, and for example, Public Enemy, a Nation of Islam rapper claims 'Farrakhan's a prophet who I think you ought to listen to'[10] in one of his songs.

Later, as a result of mainly conversion, Orthodox Islam gained more of an influence in the hip-hop scene and resulted in more Islamic references and symbols becoming 'integrated throughout hip-hop music and culture'.[11] Therefore hip-hop has had a big impact on Muslims, and although it has been used as a tool to spread certain religious ideologies it has also played a role in connecting with marginalised youth especially in Black and Latino communities who felt 'alienated from the country's liberal political and cultural traditions'.[12]

Indeed, hip-hop has been used to highlight social issues such poverty and injustice, which has contributed towards its global popularity whilst it has also been employed to express political opinions as exemplified by contemporary Muslim hip-hop artist Lupe Fiasco. Fiasco regularly refers to the Arab-Israeli conflict in his songs, whilst also tackling misconceptions regarding Islam and in one his songs claims, 'Jihad is not a holy war, wheres that in the worship? Murdering is not Islam! And you

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[5] Naeem Mohaiemen 'Fear of a Muslim Planet: The Islamic Roots of Hip-Hop *Sound Unbound* (MIT Press, 2008) p.1.
[6] Ibid., p.2.
[7] The Nation of Islam is a Black Nationalistic movement, founded by Wallace Mohammed in 1930. Wallace claimed he was the manifestation of God on earth.
[8] The Five Percent Nation was founded in 1964 by Clarence 13X who refashioned the teachings of the NOI. It teaches the Black man is God and that his proper name is ALLAH.
[9] Suad Khabeer 'Rep That Islam: The Rhyme and Reason of American Islamic Hip Hop' *The Muslim World* (Blackwell Publishing, 2007) p.126.
[10] Public Enemy 'Bring Tha Noize' www.publicenemy.com/index.php?page=page5&item=4&num=101
[11] Khabeer 'Rep' p.126.
[12] Aidi 'Marginality' p.13.

are not observant'.[13] In the same song he later criticises Barack Obama, stating that as 'Gaza strip was getting bombed, Obama didn't say shit'.[14]

Hence hip-hop can be considered an important and contemporary way of communicating to young people and Muslim hip-hop artists can be deemed as holding influence through this medium on a wider scale. Indeed, 'Muslims engage hip hop as a means of self-expression, social critique, organizing political resistance and having a good time'[15] and whilst it is relatively little known, this also includes female artists like Poetic Pilgrimage.

Female Muslim hip-hop artists are largely invisible in mainstream music scene, which could be a possible result of the male dominance that exists within the music genre. Additionally, female artists are often marginalised within the mainstream Muslim community due to the religious and cultural debates surrounding the place of women in the public sphere, and in performance.[16] There is a widespread belief that women should not perform in front of men, with hip-hop especially being seen as removed from what is traditionally expected of Muslim women.[17] Nevertheless, there are Muslim women, like Poetic Pilgrimage who are using hip-hop as a way of challenging these societal norms whilst also using their music to educate others. This phenomenon however, has been largely ignored in academia and I therefore hope that my research will be able to shed some more light onto their experiences.

Despite my initial intentions to contextualise Poetic Pilgrimage within the 'Islamic' music genre, I have chosen to locate them within the wider hip-hop scene. The reason for this is twofold. Firstly, upon reflection on my findings, it was clear that the duo saw themselves within the wider genre of hip-hop, and secondly, I feel that by removing the 'Islamic' category I will be able to see Poetic Pilgrimage for who

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[13] Lupe Fiasco 'Words I never Said' (Lasers, 2011)
[14] Ibid.,
[15] Khabeer 'Rep' p.138.
[16] Asma Barlas 'Believing Women' in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an (University of Texas Press, 2002) p.7.
[17] Khabeer 'Rep' p.132.

they are, and not what I or anyone else expects them to be. I want this study to focus more on how they reconcile different aspects of their identity such as gender, race, and religion together and how this is expressed in their music. I also want to explore the connection between their faith and their music in more detail, how it is negotiated, and the challenges they face as females in a domain that considered both within and outside the Muslim community to be that of men. I will now examine previous literature in relation to faith, gender and hip-hop in more detail.

Literature Review

There has been very little research around the experiences and challenges faced by female Muslim artists in hip-hop, despite recent scholarly interest in the connection between Muslims and hip-hop, and the creation of these 'new spaces'[18] which have allowed the exploration of multifaceted identities. Scholars such as Aidi[19], Kalra and Miah[20] in addition to Alim[21] and McMurray[22] for example, have all looked at the subject from various other perspectives. This includes hip-hop music being used as a tool for social change, as well as analysing the rise of 'Islamic' hip-hop, which is described as a 'cultural movement'.[23] However, it is Khabeer's[24] work on the connection between the Muslim religion and hip-hop in contemporary American society, which is perhaps the most well researched and informed study conducted on the topic. I will therefore begin by exploring her research paper in more detail.

Khabeer used qualitative methods and more specifically in-depth interviews with 9 Muslims involved in Islamic hip-hop including rap and hip-hop artists, a music producer and a promoter. She explores the idea of how and why hip-hop is fast becoming a popular outlet for Muslim artists, whilst also looking at the issues of gender, permissibility of music and identity construction through this medium. Most importantly, Khabeer uses the experience gained during her study to clarify the distinction between 'Islamic' and 'Muslim' hip-hop. She states that she used the term 'Islamic' in her study in order to 'distinguish a genre of hip hop music and culture created by American Muslims that seeks to comply with Islamic religious

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[18] Shamin Miah and Virinder Kalra 'Muslim Hip-Hop: The Politicisation of Kool Islam' *South Asian Cultural Studies* (SACS, 2008) p.13.
[19] Aidi 'Marginality'
[20] Kalra and Miah 'Kool'
[21] Samy Alim 'A New Research Agenda: Exploring the Transglobal Hip Hop Umma' *Muslim Networks from Hajj to Hip Hop'* Ed. Miriam Cooke and Bruce Lawrence (University of North Carolina, 2005)
[22] Anaya McMurray 'Hotep and Hip-hop: Can Black Muslim Women be Down with Hip-Hop?' *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* (Indiana University Press, 2007)
[23] Aidi 'Marginality' p.3.
[24] Khabeer 'Rep'

standards'[25], as opposed to music artists who although are Muslim, primarily appeal to a wider audience. This distinction is not only interesting but vital in looking at Muslim music artists today, because using the term 'Islamic' hip-hop for example, can insinuate a complete commitment to promoting the faith through their music, whilst also complying with certain cultural and religious expectations.[26] Thus, Khabeer provides an interesting reflection on identity construction and categorisation of Muslim hip-hop artists, and I will explore this in more detail during my research with Poetic Pilgrimage.

In terms of gender, Khabeer had interviewed one female hip-hop/rap artist called MissUndastood and devotes a section of her report to examining the challenges she faces as a women. She highlights that the objections faced by MissUndastood came from Muslims who had a strong belief that an ideal 'Muslim women should be more reserved and conservative than her real-world counterpart'[27], whist male artists also felt threatened by her entering what they felt was their domain. Although Khabeer's research only includes one female artist, which can be deemed as limiting, it does nonetheless scratch the surface of the debate around the place of Muslim women in the public sphere that has raged for centuries.[28] Indeed once I have conducted by study it will be interesting to see if there are similarities or differences between the way Poetic Pilgrimage and MissUndastood were treated by the wider Muslim community due to their gender.

Whilst Khabeer qualitative approach was focused specifically on 'Islamic' hip-hop artists, Alim looks at hip-hop more generally in his work exploring the 'Transglobal Hip-Hop Umma'.[29] He also uses the method of in-depth interviewing in addition to analysing lyrical content of artists for Islamic references and inspiration. However unlike Khabeer, Alim focuses his attention on more mainstream Muslim

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[25] Ibid., p.126.
[26] Ibid.,
[27] Ibid., p.133.
[28] Barlas *Believing* p.3.
[29] Alim 'Transglobal'

artists such as Mos Def[30], and also includes one female artist, Eve.[31] He argues that 'more attention needs to be directed at exploring the role of female artists' and 'their personal struggles'[32], which are largely ignored in academia since they do not specifically fall into an Islamic category. Indeed, there seems to be such a large emphasis on labelling of artists and musicians that little attention is given to actually exploring their lives and influences in detail, when actually this is imperative especially if they are well known in the hip hop industry and thus can be regarded as influential.

Indeed, this point of influence is reiterated in another one of his works where Alim calls such Muslim hip-hop artists, 'Verbal Mujahideen'[33] and therefore acknowledges that hip-hop is a powerful tool for educating the masses. In his interview with Alim, Mos Def claimed that 'Hip Hop is a medium where you can get a lot of information into a very small space. And make it hold fast to people's memory', and later asks 'Do you know how much vital information you could get across in 3 minutes?'[34] Mos Def calls the ability of hip-hop to connect to people, 'phenomenal'[35] and indeed the power of music to disseminate messages is something that Aidi also touches upon in his work on 'Islam, Cultural Protest and Urban Marginality'.[36] He argues that artists such as Mos Def, Q-Tip[37] and Method Man[38] use hip-hop to transmit messages of social justice in their lyrics including ideals that are inspired by Islam. Miah and Kalra also agree with Alim regarding the

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[30] Mos Def is a covert to Islam and a well-known music artist and actor who has been nominated for Grammy Awards.

[31] Eve is a Grammy Award-winning rapper, songwriter, record producer and actress. She is largely believed to be a Muslim through her use of Islamic connotations in her music.

[32] Alim 'Transglobal' p. 271.

[33] Alim 'Re-inventing Islam with Unique Modern Tones: Muslim Hip Hop Artists as Verbal Mujahidin' Souls: *A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society* (Routledge, 2006)

[34] Ibid., p.50.

[35] Ibid.,

[36] Aidi 'Marginality'

[37] Q-Tip is an American Grammy Award-winning hip-hop artist, producer, singer, and actor. He converted to Islam in the mid 1990's.

[38] Method Man is an American hip-hop artist, record producer, and member of the hip hop collective Wu-Tang Clan and belongs to the Five Percent Nation.

use of hip-hop as a tool and discuss it extensively in the 'Politicization of Kool Islam'.[39]

In this study, both Kalra and Miah claim that hip-hop music is becoming popular because it connects with the experiences of young Muslims and is used to 'articulate ongoing struggles against demonization, poverty and equality'[40], which reinforces the sentiments of Mos Def. In their study they analyse lyrical content of 'Islamic' hip-hop artists such as Soldiers of Allah[41] who they conclude are using such a medium to get across political messages such as reinstating the Caliphate.

On the other hand, 'Muslim' artists are using it to challenge more general issues such as the 'assumption of passivity amongst Muslim women'[42] and raise issues of gender equality through their music. However, Kalra and Miah omit any detailed exploration of female artists, although American Muslim acts such as MissUndastood and Sister Haero are mentioned. This highlights the need for more ethnographic studies, like those conducted by Alim and Khabeer that utilise qualitative methods such as in-depth interviewing to speak to artists directly about their experiences, as opposed to making assumption based on socially constructed categories.

Indeed, the only study that seems to examine Muslim female artists outside the 'Islamic' category and explores their relationship within the context of race is by McMurray, who asks 'Can Black Muslim women be down with hip-hop?'[43] McMurray argues that for some it is 'almost unfathomable that Black Muslim women would have any involvement with hip-hop'[44] and examines three cases studies in her research including Erykah Badu[45], Eve and herself who she classes as being part of the hip-hop generation that emerged in the 80's and 90's in America.

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[39] Miah and Kalra 'Kool' p.13.
[40] Ibid.,
[41] Soldiers of Allah are a Muslim rap group from LA.
[42] Miah and Kalra 'Kool' p.13.
[43] McMurray 'Hotep'
[44] Ibid,. p.74.
[45] Erykah Badu is an American recording artist, record producer and said to be part of the Five Percent Nation.

McMurray argues that Black Muslim women like her 'balance structures in Islam with hip-hop culture'[46] and thus find a space in which they can express their multiple identities. Indeed, although artist such as Eve may not openly state their religious affiliation, McMurray notes that religious influence is still important and like Alim, examines lyrical content of artists. For example in Eve's case she uses Allah instead of God, and thanks him in her music, whilst Badu who 'the average listener may not attribute'[47] to being a Muslim because she follows the Five Percent Nation[48], also has similar connotations in her music. McMurray considers herself a Muslim and states that although her songs may not be 'considered explicitly Islamic' they are a 'reflection of my spirituality and how spirituality influences my analysis of my surroundings'.[49] Thus it is clear that religion can play an influence in the lives of female artists and although it may be overlooked because they do not fit the stereotypical 'good girl'[50] image of a Muslim woman, it still forms a part of their identity.

Aside from literature, Muslim women in hip-hop are increasingly attracting the interest of the media and Poetic Pilgrimage themselves have been featured in The New Statesman[51] and the BBC[52] amongst others organisations. The reason for this media interest is unclear, although some seem genuinely intrigued by the notion of Muslim women using their voices publically, and thus challenging popular stereotypes regarding a women's place within Islam. Motue for example, claims that 'female artists trying to break into the scene are often intimidated, or even threatened in the male-dominated world of hip-hop' with the case being even worse for Muslim artists since it is seen as a profession that is 'highly undesirable for young women'.[53] However such articles are limited in depth, and due to their journalistic nature lack social scientific standards of research.

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[46] McMurray 'Hotep' p.74.
[47] Ibid., p.77.
[48] See note 8.
[49] McMurray 'Hotep' p.85.
[50] Ibid., p.87.
[51] Vic Motue 'Sing out Sisters' (New Statesman, 2008)
[52] 'Desi DNA Meets Poetic Pilgrimage' www.bbc.co.uk/asiannetwork/desidna/galleries/1019/2//
[53] Motue 'Sisters'

Thus, as we can see, it is imperative that female Muslim hip-hop artists are explored in more detail because as McMurray states 'though Muslim women contribute to hip-hop culture, this is rarely discussed'.[54] Indeed, despite ethnographic work by the likes of Khabeer and Alim which give us a good grounding on the connection between Muslims and hip-hop, both are limited in their exploration of the experience of female artists. Similarly, the problem of categorisation of music as 'Islamic' or not has excluded some female acts from being explored despite evidence from their lyrical content that religion is often used as an inspiration.[55] Indeed, we have seen a clear relationship between hip-hop being significant in providing a space for Muslim women to construct their own narratives and also negotiate their multiple identities. It is therefore vital that qualitative research methods are used to explore the challenges and experiences of Poetic Pilgrimage in relation to these, first-hand.

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[54] McMurray 'Hotep' p.85.
[55] Miah and Kalra 'Kool' p.13.

<u>Methodology</u>

Now that we have located the study of female Muslims in hip-hop in previous literature, it is important to examine the research methods that I will employ in this study. Since 'ethnography is about telling a credible, rigorous, and authentic story'[56], it is vital that the right research methods are selected. Usually, ethnographies rely on thick description generated from qualitative research methods, including prolonged observation and interviewing. Following this tradition, my study will also consist of in depth interviewing and direct observation of the duo while they are performing. However before examining the rationale behind the selection of each of these research methods, I will explain the importance of taking a qualitative methodological approach to this ethnographic study, as opposed to a quantitative approach.

Why qualitative methods?

Historically, qualitative methods were associated with colonial studies of the 'other' and the exploration of foreign cultures by ethnographers and anthropologists such as Bronisław Malinowski who was renowned for his fieldwork on the Trobriand Islands. Over time however, concerns over the ethics of conducting such fieldwork increased, because they were seen as reflecting 'dominant understandings of race, ethnicity and gender'[57] as opposed to challenging ideas of imperialism, colonialism and orientalist attitudes. Modern ethnographers later discarded this ethnocentric approach to research, after the Chicago School modified research methods and ethical standards in the early twentieth century.[58] As a result, although social science research often refers back to early ethnographers such as Mead, and

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[56] David Fetterman *Ethnography: Step By Step* (Sage Publications, 2010) p.1.
[57] Julian Murchison *Ethnography Essentials* (Jossey-Bass, 2010) p.5.
[58] Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln *Landscape of Qualitative Research* (Sage Publications, 1998) p. 1.

Malinowski, there has since been an increased focus on reflexivity, the impact of the researcher in the field, and the epistemological position that they take.[59]

Once ethical issues are into consideration, qualitative methods form a vital part of social science research and especially studies that focus on disadvantaged social groups, since they allow the production of detailed and thorough data. Indeed, despite some critics arguing that such an approach is 'soft'[60], studies using qualitative methods have been able to successfully explore 'at risk populations'[61] and less researched groups.

This is exemplified in Bano's research into the proceedings of Sharia Councils in the UK[62], which gave Muslim women a space to explain their choices to use Sharia councils, which are often thought to discriminate against women. Bolognani also conducted various ethnographic studies on Muslims in Bradford, but notes that after 9/11 especially, 'due to the climate of Islamophobia'[63], there was mistrust towards researchers, which resulted in less access available to such populations. She does however state that traditional ethnographic methods such as participant observation, and 'research bargaining',[64] can still help gain access, into addition to gaining respect amongst participants, and therefore draws upon Malinowski's research tradition.

The key advantages of using qualitative methods are therefore clear. In addition to giving an accessing marginalised and less researched groups, such an approach provides a detailed insight into the subject matter. It can do this because ethnography is not bound formative theory or aimed at determining whether it is right or wrong. Instead it 'expands to fit the model'[65] and therefore the research is

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[59] Sophie Gilliat-Ray 'Body-works and fieldwork: Research with British Muslims Chaplains' *Culture and Religion* Vol 11 (Routledge, 2010)

[60] Denzin and Lincoln *Landscape* p. 10.

[61] Raymond Lee *Unobtrusive methods in Social Research* (Open University Press, 2000) p.11.

[62] Samia Bano, 'Islamic Family Arbitration, Justice and Human Rights in Britain' *Law, Social Justice & Global Development Journal* (2007)

[63] Marta Bolognani 'Islam, Ethnography and Politics: Methodological issues in researching amongst West Yorkshire Pakistanis in 2005' *Int. J. Social Research Methodology* (Taylor & Francis, 2007) p. 281.

[64] Ibid., p280

[65] Stephen Schensul, Jean Schensul and Margaret LeCompte *Essential Ethnographic Methods: Observations, Interviews, and Questionnaires* (Sage Publications, 1999) p. 3.

not limited to providing statistical proofs, but instead aims to examine and understand human nature and behaviour.

Taking these points into consideration, it is therefore vital that qualitative methods are used in this study in order to gain a detailed insight into the lives, experiences and challenges faced by Poetic Pilgrimage. More importantly, the methods will be able to provide an in depth picture of the duo, whilst giving them the opportunity to narrate their story themselves.

As two female' hip-hop artists, who come from Afro-Caribbean backgrounds, and follow the Islamic faith, it can be argued that they fall into the less researched category. Thus, a qualitative methodological approach is suited to such a group because we know little about them but also in a more general way it allows us to delve into the lives and experiences of female Muslim hip-hop artists, who combine their passion for music, with highlighting issues of injustice, racism and identity amongst many other issues through it. Muslim women are often portrayed as oppressed, void of expression and unable to speak for themselves, and therefore it is vital that we get the opportunity to explore the meaning behind Poetic Pilgrimage, whose very existence is challenging such perceptions.[66]

I believe that such an in-depth analysis of the lives and challenges of Poetic Pilgrimage cannot be suitably achieved if a solely quantitative approach was to be used instead.   This is due to the fact that quantitative methods are more suited to providing statistical data and although they are popular amongst market research companies, they do lack detail.[67] Furthermore the restrictive nature of the approach denies the researcher the ability to probe answers further. It also leaves the researcher to infer meanings and conclusions, as opposed to giving the participants the power to narrate their own stories, which is what this study is about.

However, despite such disadvantages, quantitative methods can still provide access to vital information, and could have proved useful if this study was conducted

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[66] Mahnaz Afkhami and Erika Friedl *Muslim Women and the Politics of Participation* (Syracuse University Press, 1997) p.xxi.

[67] Raymond Opdenakker 'Advantages and Disadvantages of Four Interview Techniques in Qualitative Research' *Qualitative Social Research* Vol 7 (Institute for Qualitative Research, 2006) p.3.

on a wider scale. For example, if I was looking at a number of female Muslim musicians comparatively, triangulation of qualitative and quantitative research could have been an option. Indeed such a combination of methods is not uncommon amongst researchers, as it 'ensures that the numerical data is valid and effective representation of the phenomenon being measured'.**[68]** However, this study is specifically looking at one case study in detail due to time and space constraints, and therefore a qualitative methodological approach consisting of interviewing and direct observation is best suited to addressing the research questions.

Why Multiple Methods?

The reason I will be employing multiple methods in this study is so that I can get a fuller and better picture of the hip-hop duo. Indeed, although there is often much to be gained in terms of data from interviewing alone, as a single research method it can be problematic especially since we can assume that 'knowledge is not gained my simple asking.[69] Indeed, multiple methods in ethnographic studies are usually an indicator of the depth and quality of research, whilst also acting as a way to substantiate any conclusions and findings.

McLoughlin for example used a combination of 'participant observation and unstructured interviews'[70] of his study of Muslims in Bradford in addition to recording his theories, thoughts and reflections in a diary. Similarly, Darbyshire, Macdougall, and Schiller used a variety of methods in their study of children including focus group interviews, mapping and photovoice techniques.[71] They felt multiple methods would 'capture a broader and deeper range of… perceptions and experiences than a reliance on a single technique'[72] and I hope that my methods will also allow me to do this with Poetic Pilgrimage. I will now discuss the two methods I will be using in this study in more detail.

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[68] Schensul et al *Interviews* p.6.
[69] Alan Kellehear *The Unobtrusive Researcher: A guide to methods* (Allen & Unwin, 1993) p.1.
[70] Sean McLoughlin 'Researching Muslim minorities' *Journal of Semitic Studies* Vol 12 (Routledge, 2010) p.176.
[71] Philip Darbyshire, Colin MacDougall, and Wendy Schiller 'Multiple methods in Qualitative Research with Children: more insight or just more?' *Qualitative Research* (Sage Publications, 2005) p.417.
[72] Ibid., p.423.

Interviewing

Interviewing, which is one of the key methods used in ethnographic research encompasses many forms and is described by Abbas as 'a method for determining an understanding of the social world to which all contribute and through which are all influenced'.[73] It has been argued by social constructionists that it is difficult for researchers to detach themselves from their field of study, while others also claim that 'interviewing changes attitudes and the behaviour they mediate'[74], and therefore assumes that the information they gather is not necessarily 'truth'. Nonetheless, positivist researchers still aim for the 'creation of a pure interview'[75], which they argue should be a reflection of reality despite contestation of whether this is achievable. Indeed, interviews provide vital access to the 'meanings people attribute to their experiences and social worlds'[76] and result in significant amount of data. For my research, I needed to determine whether questionnaire style structured interviews or unstructured interviews were best suited to my study.

I decided against using structured questionnaire style interviews despite them being the most familiar method to the public. Atkinson and Silverman comment that although their widespread usage has led to what some could call an 'interview society'[77], the 'interview' itself lacks depth and a structured format is unable to provide the researcher with detailed information due to restrictive categories that limit participant's responses. Furthermore, questionnaire style formats do not give the researcher the opportunity to probe responses, and ask follow up questions, and thus the respondents are 'forced into an artificial one-way mode of communication'.[78] As Fontana and Frey argue, 'asking questions and

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[73] Tahir Abbas 'Muslim-on-Muslim Social Research: Knowledge, Power and Religio-cultural Identities' *Social Epistemology* Vol. 24 (Routledge, 2010) p.124.

[74] Gary Bridge 'Interviewing Changes Attitudes-Sometimes' *The Public Opinion Quarterly* Vol. 41 (Oxford University Press, 1977) p.56.

[75] Jody Miller and Barry Glassner 'The inside and the outside: Finding realities in interviews' in *Qualitative Research: Theory, Method and Practice*, ed. David Silverman (Sage Publications, 2004) p.99.

[76] Ibid., p.100.

[77] Paul Atkinson and David Silverman *'Kundera's Immortality: The Interview Society and the Invention of Self', Qualitative Inquiry* (Sage Publications, 1997)

[78] Andrew Sayer *Method in Social Science* (Routledge, 1992) p.223.

getting answers is a much harder task then it may seem to be at first'[79] and so questionnaire style interviewing was seen as unable to will to provide sufficient data addressing my initial research question and unable to target issues that may be sensitive or complex.

I therefore decided to use an unstructured approach to interviewing in order to have the 'opportunity to work directly with the respondents'.[80] Such an approach will give me the researcher, and my participants, Poetic Pilgrimage, the flexibility to cover sensitive issues and topics in an informal and relaxed atmosphere. Secondly, since I will be exploring one case study, in depth interviews can allow me to draw vast amounts of information from my interviewees in addition to providing the 'opportunity to probe or ask follow up questions'.[81] Furthermore, in-depth interviewing will allow me to take advantage of 'social cues, such as voice, intonation, body language ...that can be added to the verbal answer of the interviewee'.[82] Finally, unlike structured interviewing which can be exhausting for interviewees, in depth interviews can often feel more like a detailed discussion, and thus put my participants at ease.

Observation

The second research method that I will be using is observation. Observation is one of the key methods used in ethnographic research, and was initially used by anthropologists as 'their primary and most exclusive method'.[83] Although the majority of ethnographic studies now incorporate more than one method, observation it is still a dominant part of the research process and vital in gaining an insight into human behaviour. Kellehear argues that that participant observation is essential because it is often what remains unsaid that provides us with interesting data [84]. O'Reilly states that 'most ethnographers use participant observation,

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[79] Denzin and Lincoln *The Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Sage Publications, 2000) p.645.
[80] Steinar Kvale *Interviews:* An Introduction to *Qualitative Research Interviewing* (Sage Publications, 1996) p.88.
[81] Ibid., p134.
[82] Opdenakker 'Advantages' p.3.
[83] David Walsh 'Doing Ethnography' in *Researching Society and Culture,* ed. Clive Seale (Sage Publications, 2004) p. 218.
[84] Alan Kellehear *Unobstrusive* p.1.

combined with qualitative interviews'[85] and this is something that I will also do in this study.

I will use observation of Poetic Pilgrimage in performance as way to observe their behaviour, body language and attitude in addition to how people respond to them. As Denzin and Lincoln note, 'social scientists are observers both of human activities and of the physical settings in which such activities take place'[86] and therefore not only will I be playing close attention to Poetic Pilgrimage while they perform, but also the setting, location, and the audience. This data gathered will be equally important to in the research process since it can 'reveal things of which the participant is sometime unaware'[87] and therefore open up different perspectives on the subject being researched.

By using this method I will become the 'primary research instrument'[88], covertly observing from a distance so as to 'reduce the possibility of people reacting to being observed'[89] and thus able to view the performance without making my presence obvious. This enables me to become a participant observer, and therefore gain the perspective of an audience member. As stated by Silverman, 'a study becomes ethnographic when the fieldworker is careful to connect the facts that s/he observes with the specific features of the backdrop against which these facts occur'[90] and this allows us to understand what we see in context.

Although I envisage it will be difficult to take notes openly during their performance without attracting attention, I will take a notepad and pen with me in case there are moments where I can jot down notes. This is vital since the points will be fresh in my head and if this process is delayed, details could possibly be forgotten, or relayed incorrectly and therefore affecting the reliability of the findings. Observation can also be done in the form of shadowing, as exemplified by Gilliat-ray during her research with Muslim chaplains. She followed a hospital chaplain at work

[85] Karen O'Reilly *Ethnographic methods* (Routledge, 2011) p.32.
[86] Denzin and Lincoln *Handbook* p.673.
[87] Murchison *Essentials* p.6.
[88] Walsh 'Ethnography' p.218.
[89] Ibid., p.222.
[90] Silverman 'Qualitative Research' p.10.

and claimed that such experiences can provide 'significant insights'[91] in to the subject, and provides valuable information more then perhaps even an interview. Due to the nature of this study, and the busy schedule of Poetic Pilgrimage, shadowing was not something that seemed feasible, although it is something that can be kept in mind in case of future research.

Whilst observing, the researcher must be careful in monitoring their impact on the environment or activities they are observing, as this is crucial to good social science research.[92] Ethical considerations also need to be acknowledged before engaging in observation of participants. For example, theorists like Mill and Weber believe that researcher should be open about their identity since 'subjects have the right to be informed about the nature and the consequence of the experiments in which they are involved'.[93]

Indeed, I will let Poetic Pilgrimage know I will be attending the performance in my capacity as a researcher, however I will not a point of introducing myself and make my role obvious in order to 'minimise the problems of pretence'.[94] This will also allow me to observe from a distance and limit the chances of my participants changing their behaviour as a reaction to my presence. Indeed, Schensul et al state that observation 'from a distance is only possible when it can be conducted unobtrusively, in such a way that the participants do not notice the researcher'[95] and this is how I intend to observe the performance. Ethical requirements in line with the Chicago School do not necessitate that I make it known to the audience that I am a researcher, since it is a public event.[96] Furthermore, my main concern is with the performers who would be aware of my presence, as opposed to the audience.

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[91] Gilliat-Ray 'Body-works' p.428.
[92] Denzin and Lincoln *Handbook* p.674.
[93] Ibid p.138.
[94] Walsh 'Ethnography' p.222.
[95] Schensul et al *Interviews* p.72.
[96] Robert Sampson and Stephen Raudenbus 'Systematic Social Observation of Public Spaces' *American Journal of Sociology* (University of Chicago Press, 1999) p.606.

Negotiating Access

'The problem of obtaining access to the data looms large in ethnography'[97], and indeed this process is something that often evolves as the study progresses. For example the researcher may be granted initial access into a setting, but a constant renegotiation may need to take place throughout the study in order to gain further access. Indeed, despite gaining initial access and approval from Muneera to conduct my research, renegotiations needed to be made throughout the process in regards to the dates, locations and times of the observation and interview.

The process of negotiating access to Poetic Pilgrimage consisted of many stages. Indeed it is a rare case in ethnography that access does not present issues to the researcher, and it is widely acknowledged that this is perhaps one of the most important stages in research process. There have been cases where access has been refused despite a variety of methods utilised in order to engage with gatekeepers and those in positions of authority. This is exemplified by Gilliat-Ray in her attempt to enter the Deobandi seminaries in the UK.[98] Despite utilising 'face to face discussion, the use of gatekeepers, and letter writing'[99], her attempts remained unsuccessful. Her experience emphasises the often-exhaustive methods that researchers use in order to gain access, but also demonstrates that 'gaining access is unpredictable'.[100]

For me social media networks and email conversations were key tools in helping me gain initial contact with Poetic Pilgrimage. From previous knowledge acquired about them through the Internet, media articles and conversations with colleagues, I knew they tended to be busy performing and working with the community. Indeed, the knowledge I had gained about them prior to the research was important in helping me decide how to approach the issue of access. Similarly, in her research on Muslims in Bradford, Bolognani states that her 'access strategy

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[97] Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson *Ethnography: Principles in Practice* (Routledge, 1994) p.41.
[98] Gilliat-Ray 'Closed worlds (Not) Accessing dar ul-uloom In Britain' *Fieldwork in Religion* (Equinox Publishing, 2005)
[99] Ibid., p.19.
[100] John Johnson *Doing Field Research* (Free Press, 1975) p.50.

was built around previous knowledge of the field'[101] and this allowed her to choose which approaches she felt most comfortable with and which she assumed would be most effective. Thus taking previous knowledge about Poetic Pilgrimage into consideration, I anticipated that it would be a challenge to get in touch with them personally but also to negotiate times in their busy schedule when I could conduct my research. The process of gaining initial access however was made significantly easier by the presence of social media networks.

I began by performing a search on social media sites Facebook and Twitter to see if Poetic Pilgrimage had pages on there, and if there were any contact details to be found on them. I found that they had a profile on Twitter[102], which was updated fairly regularly, however, it was their Facebook[103] fan page that proved to be more useful. The fan page included information regarding previous and upcoming gigs, what the duo have been up to, and also a number of pictures. However, vitally for me, they also had an information section, which gave a brief biography of the group along with a contact email address. Although I was grateful that the email address was publically accessible I was a bit apprehensive of its usage and whether or not Sukina and Muneera checked it regularly themselves and indeed whether or not I would get a response.

Despite these reservations, I sent an email to Poetic Pilgrimage in which I outlined the aims and objectives of my research project, and whether they would like to get involved. I clarified that it would not take up much of their time, but would be incredibly beneficial to my dissertation project. A week later I still had received no response and therefore I decided to 'tweet' them on Twitter and gave them a gentle reminder of the email I had sent. I then decided to write a follow up email, and on the same day received an email back from Muneera, who explained that were in Morocco and upon their arrival will contact me and also kindly provided her mobile number. Once they arrived in the UK I waited two days before contacting them again. After a few missed calls and voicemail messages, I finally managed to

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[101] Bolognani 'Yorkshire' p.283
[102] www.twitter.com/PoeticPilgramage
[103] www.facebook.com/PoeticPilgramage

have a phone conversation with Muneera where I explained my research to her in detail. Muneera was very understanding and genuinely interested in the project and agreed to let me know when they would be available next.

Over the subsequent email conversations we agreed to meet in Bristol over a weekend in July, as they were due to perform at a live music lounge on the Saturday and we agreed it would be suitable for all parties involved if the interview would take place on the Sunday. It had been a long negotiating process to get to this stage, especially since the group were so busy with other commitments. My experience reiterated the fat that 'gaining access is often unpredictable'[104] and even once access is gained; constant renegotiations need to be made. In my case, there were no gatekeepers involved as they were for Gilliat-Ray in her attempts to enter the Dar ul-Uloom.[105] Instead I had the opportunity of liaising directly with my participants in this study, which was more beneficial than gatekeepers since whilst they can be a help, they 'also have the authority to prevent entry'.[106].

Locations and Data Collection Methods

The location for the observation was a live music lounge in the heart of Bristol. I decided to take a notepad and pen along with me in addition to a camera in order to be able to capture details of the performance and location. The interview was to be held the next day and since I was unfamiliar with the city of Bristol, I was initially a bit perplexed as to where it would be held. I wanted to give the participants a choice to suggest their own location in case they was something they were more comfortable with. If not, then I would have needed to locate somewhere I felt suitable. However prior to the interview it transpired that a camera crew had been filming a documentary about Poetic Pilgrimage, and were also filming them during their weekend at Bristol. On Saturday morning the documentary maker rang me to ask if they could film part of the interview for their documentary. They then suggested a cafe in Bristol, which had agreed to allow both the filming, and interview to take place in and thus this solved the location problem. The café was empty and

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[104] Lee *Doing Research on Sensitive Topics* (Sage Publications, 1993) p. 121.
[105] Gilliat-Ray 'Accessing'
[106] Lee *Sensitive* p.123

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quiet, and therefore provided a perfect and secure interview setting. I was therefore able to conduct my research, while Poetic Pilgrimage managed to get more material for their upcoming documentary and we were all therefore in effect winners out of the situation.

Conducting My Research

Saturday- Observing Poetic Pilgrimage in Performance

During email conversations with Muneera regarding conducting my research, it became apparent that their performance at The Canteen in Bristol on the Saturday night was a significant event. In one email Muneera stated that the 'gig was a big deal to them' and later during the performance I realised this was because it was an opportunity for them to showcase their talent in the city of their childhood, and show how far they had come as hip-hip artists.

The performance itself was due to begin 10.30pm, and taking this timing into consideration in addition to the location, I assumed that this particular gig was not aimed at a specifically Muslim audience, and this did indeed prove to be the case. In fact, when observing their performance, I did not see any 'visibly' Muslim individuals, although this is not to say they were any. The audience consisted of mostly young students to middle aged adults, with a mixture of both men and women. Alcohol was freely served and most of the audience were drinking a form of alcoholic drink. I had brought a friend along with me during my observations as the location was unfamiliar to me, and also the timing was relatively late and I would have felt uncomfortable returning from the event on my own.

 I sat towards the front of the audience as much as I could towards the stage and there were a few chairs, whilst most people were on their feet. I had a notebook and pen with me, however due to the vibrant atmosphere, and also the lack of seating, note taking proved difficult. Furthermore, I did not want to attract attention to myself, and so I felt it best to write most of my notes after the

performance. I took a few photos on my camera phone in order to visually remind myself of the setting. Once back at the hotel I spent 3 hours writing up notes and transferring all my thoughts on to paper ready for the analysis process.

Sunday- The Interview

The location for the interview secured by Poetic Pilgrimage's camera crew was a quiet trendy cafe in the heart of Bristol, and in fact on the same street where they had performed the night before. From walking around the city where both Muneera and Sukina hail from, I got the impression that this side of town was particularly associated with trendy music and activism. The streets were lined with graffiti including prominent pieces by the famous artist, Banksy whilst the café also shared this artistic vibe. Each table was home to a pile of books, while the walls were scattered with paintings from local artists. On occasion I even saw the manager taking up a paintbrush and working on his next creation.

The cafe gave me the impression that creativity was welcome here, thus making it a perfect setting for such an interview. Since it was secured specifically for our purposes, there were no members of the public present, making it quiet enough to have an excellent sound recording of the interview on my Dictaphone. I also had my notebook and pen with me in order to write notes on anything that I felt was particularly useful including the body language of the participants, in addition to recording my own thoughts as part of a reflective approach exemplified by Gilliat-Ray in her study with Muslim chaplains.[107]

In order to 'guide' the interview I constructed a set of research questions, which targeted areas that I wanted to find out more information about. Blaikie described the formulation of research questions as 'the real starting point in the preparation of research design'[108] while the guide ensures 'that the same general

[107] Gilliat-Ray 'Body-works'

[108] Norman Blaikie *Designing Social Research: The logic of Anticipation* (Polity Press, 2000) p.17.

areas of information are collected from each interviewee'[109], which is vital in the analysis stage.

> - What was the inspiration behind Poetic Pilgrimage?
> - How would you describe what you stand for?
> - How do you identify yourself?
> - How important is hip-hop to you?
> - What do you hope to gain through your music?
> - What are the main challenges you face?
> - How do you overcome these?
>
> (Interview Guide)

The questions that I constructed were used as a point of reference and to redirect the interview if the discussion moved away from the relevant issues. Having a copy of the interview guide with me during the interview proved useful, and often acted as a prompt of where to take discussion next. However before discussing the findings that the observations and interview yielded, it is important to explore the notion of reflexivity, whilst also taking into consideration limitations of my methodological approach.

A Reflexive Approach

As Gilliat-Ray has states, 'the body' has become a 'a significant area for theoretical reflection in the social sciences'[110] over the last two decades, and now forms an important part of the research process. Although a reflexive approach to research has its opponents since it can 'run the risk of being solely inward focused'[111], I felt that taking such an approach provided me with the ability to evaluate the impact of my own body effectively, since it is a 'vital instrument of data collection'.[112] My embodiment could affect the information I received from my participants and whether I was perceived as an insider or outsider. Furthermore, due to the nature of ethnographic studies which occur in a naturalistic setting, these

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[109] Ibid.,
[110] Gilliat-Ray 'Body-works' p.413.
[111] Ibid., p.425.
[112] Ibid., p.414.

'unique situations cannot be reconstructed precisely'.[113] Thus if another researcher was to conduct the exact same research, it is unlikely that they will yield the same results. Hence is vital that researchers evaluate and discuss the impact they have on the setting in order to substantiate their findings.

As a young British and female Muslim researcher, I personally felt I had 'an added insight'[114] into the topics at hand and that Poetic Pilgrimage saw me as an insider during the research process. This was due to the fact that my surname would have partly revealed my background, and indeed 'personal history'[115] is something that Kalra notes as being 'inscribed'[116] on one's body. More interestingly however, the participants assumed I understood certain challenges and dynamics of the Muslim community, like for example the debate surrounding female performers, and also the dispute over the permissibility of music. This therefore provided me with a strong indication of my 'insider' status unlike the experience McLoughlin had during his research in Bradford[117] or Bolognani who was referred to as a 'gore'.[118]

Nevertheless, the gender, identity and religion of the researcher, does not necessarily mean that a 'absolute barrier'[119] is created, but that the access process and findings could vary depending on how the researcher is perceived. This insider/outsider distinction is important to the researcher because it can affect interactions with participants and the information they are willing to share. I will now examine each factor that could possibly have affected the way I was perceived in the field, starting with gender.

Gender

Gender can and does have an impact during research. It can affect the extent to which the researcher is perceived as a 'insider' who shares an understanding of issues relating to gender, or on the contrary as someone who is perceived as being

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[113] Schensul et al *Interviews* p.35.
[114] Abbas 'Muslim' p.131.
[115] Gilliat-Ray 'Body-works' p.416.
[116] Ibid.,
[117] McLoughlin 'Researching' p.188.
[118] Bolognani 'Yorkshire' p. 285.
[119] McLoughlin 'Pakistanis' p.281.

unable to relate to the experiences of the participants. Some researchers, such as Jeffrey argue that being a female researcher was advantageous since it 'provided her with access that could have been denied to men'[120] due strict gender segregation in some Muslim communities. Whilst in my case, I didn't think Poetic Pilgrimage would have necessarily rejected a male researcher, I did however feel being female allowed me to relate to them more during the interview especially. Indeed, Knott relates that some female researchers felt their gender allowed them to be seen as 'non-threatening' and 'less confrontational'[121] and thus creating a more relaxed discussion.

However, gender matching could also have potential pitfalls and as one female research narrates, her husband 'became the focus on attention in the interview setting'[122], even though he was merely accompanying her. Indeed it can be the case where being a female researcher is not taken as seriously by participants, or treated as a 'great researcher'[123] as was experienced by Knott. However in this particular study, I felt my gender was an advantage to the research process. I felt that I was able to build rapport and friendly discussion with my participants before the interview in a relaxed atmosphere. It also allowed me to probe some issues further and in a less threatening way. For example, I asked how they felt about wearing makeup and if they felt pressured to tone down their femininity while performing due to certain opinions that others may have.

Another benefit of gender matching in my research was that I did not have to consider whether my actions were conflicting with Islamic gender norms.[124] For example, being alone with my participants, shaking their hands, or coming across as overtly friendly in my behaviour, which is in some cases, is frowned upon if occurring between the opposite sexes. Overall, I felt I had an added insight and understanding of the extent to which Poetic Pilgrimage were breaking boundaries and stereotypes in both Muslim and non-Muslim communities.

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[120] Ibid.,

[121] Kim Knott 'Women Researching, Women Researched' in ed. Ursula King *Religion and Gender* (Blackwell, 1996) p. 203.

[122] Ibid.,

[123] Ibid.,

[124] Bolognani 'Yorkshire' p. 279.

Religion

Before contacting Poetic Pilgrimage regarding participating in my study, I knew there was going to be 'religious matching'.[125] I was born into a Muslim family while both my Muneera and Sukina of Poetic Pilgrimage converted to Islam from Christian and Rastafarian backgrounds. Although Muslims are ethnically and culturally diverse, the Muslim Ummah is often referred to as united under this religious identity, which surpasses such ethnic and cultural ones.[126] Thus the fact that we hailed from such diverse backgrounds, did not affect the fact that a common religious identity existed between us. However the debate about 'who is best in a position to carry out research on others'[127] has been raging for centuries, and it would been a mistake for me to assume that due to our common religion, my evaluations would be more correct. Indeed, religion matching as can be both regarded as both an advantage and a disadvantage, and is explored by Abbas in more detail in his paper, 'Muslim on Muslim Social Research'.[128]

For me, the advantages of religious matching were very clear. I was for example, able to have an 'insider' status and use my knowledge of the Muslim community during the interview, and also during observation critically evaluate how such a performance was likely to be received. Indeed, 'being a Muslim minority does potentially provide an added insight'[129] and I was able to discuss issues facing female Muslim hip-hop artists from cases that I had been aware of, whilst also using my knowledge of the hip-hop music scene, which I experienced growing up. Thus I think gender combined with religion were predominant factors in contributing to an insider status during the research process.

However religious matching can also be disadvantageous for a number of reasons. Firstly, there are many different types of religious traditions that Muslims follow, and various schools of thought, which is reflective of the global diversity of

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[125] Abbas 'Muslim' p.126.
[126] Ron Geaves *Sectarian influences within Islam in Britain – With reference to the concepts of 'Ummah' and 'Community* (University of Leeds, 1996) p. 10.
[127] Abbas 'Muslim' p.126.
[128] Ibid.,
[129] Ibid., p.131.

Islam. Divisions along theological lines can cause problems, as exemplified in the first mosque in Cardiff, which caused a permanent rift within the local Muslim community.[130] Participants could try to interpret 'what type of Muslim'[131] you are, and this could affect the way they respond to your questions. If for example, I had the line of thought that women should not engage in hip-hop and perform in front of mixed audiences, my participants could have perceived this.

Similarly, even though I do not hold such a view, any openness that the researcher holds could lead to a potential bias and affect the objectivity of the research. I tried to not let any of my own personal beliefs affect my study, however the researcher cannot be removed completely from their own experiences and history, and as Kalra says 'it is written all over them'.[132] Overall however, I felt that the common religious background between my participants and myself was more of an advantage since it allowed me to have an insider's perspective on the issues at hand.

Age

As a student researcher, I think my age had an impact on the research process and the way I was perceived in the field. At 22, there are only a few years between myself, Muneera and Sukina. Thus the age difference was not a dramatic one. Before the interview, I was able to exchange experiences of London with Muneera, where we both went to University, and discussed courses, student life and career choices. This contributed to an easy going, relaxed atmosphere, as well as discovering common ground in places we had been or visited. Perhaps if there was a dramatic age difference we would have had less in common to talk about and there could have been more of a distinction between my participants and me as the researcher.

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[130] Gilliat-Ray and Jodie Mellor 'Bilad al-Welsh: Muslims in Cardiff, South Wales: past, present and future' *The Muslim World* Vol.100 (Hartford Seminary, 2010) p.458.
[131] Abbas 'Muslim' p.130.
[132] Gilliat-Ray 'Body-works' p.416.

Dress

I decided to dress down when conducting observation of Poetic Pilgrimage's performance since it was an evening event, and I did not want to stand out from the crowd. I opted for a silky top, with jeans and some bracelets. For the interview, again I did not want to come across as an outsider or too serious and in fact spent a while contemplating whether I should dress formally, or smart casually. I ended up opting for a smart casual appearance, twinning a smart blazer with casual trousers and a scarf around my neck. I usually wear a scarf but this time is was a conscious effort. Similarly, Gilliat-Ray mentions that she wore a shawl during her research with chaplains as it added to her 'respectability'[133] and can be described as being a safer opinion then being perceived as immodest or disrespectful to the research environment.

Methodological Reflections

After research has been conducted, it is important to look back and reflect on the research process, the methodology chosen and how it could or should have been done differently. This process allows the researcher to critically evaluate their research and findings, and address any possible threats to the validity of any conclusions gained. Indeed, as Le Compte argues, it is 'up to the researchers to demonstrate the credibility of their findings'[134] and therefore be aware of anything that may have affected their credibility.

I believe that for this ethnographic study, qualitative research methods were ideal for gaining an insight into the experiences and challenges of Poetic Pilgrimage. However, in review, I think the research methods used, i.e. in depth interviewing and observation could have been utilised further to derive more data, had there been more time for this study. Similarly had space and time allowed, there could have been an expansion of the number of research methods used, in addition to the

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[133] Gilliat-Ray 'Body-works' p.420.
[134] Margaret LeCompte 'Problems of Reliability and Validity in Ethnographic Research' *Review of Educational Research* (ERA, 1982) p.31.

longevity of the study. I will discuss each research method in detail to reflect on its usage, and highlight where improvements could have been made.

Observation

Participant observation is a prominent part of ethnographic studies and early anthropologists used to spend months or years in fact staying with those they were researching. Therefore longevity of observation is a key aspect to gaining an in-depth understanding of participants, in different situations over a long period of time.[135] However in my case participant observation over an extended period of time was not only unrealistic due to time restrictions and the size of the study but also would have been exhausting for act which only consists of two people. Hence, permission for having a researcher living with and amongst them, and following them on their busy schedule would have most likely been refused. Additionally, this could have presented problems relating to religious and cultural boundaries, especially in the case of other males living in the house. Furthermore, although in some cases such researchers have been seen as 'honoury'[136] guests and able to interact with both genders, this could also result in restrictions to freedom. Thus although a longer period of observation would have been useful in widening our perspective on Poetic Pilgrimage, it was unfeasible for this particular study.

Interviewing

The in-depth interview was incredibly detailed and allowed me to gain a large amount of data from Muneera about Poetic Pilgrimage. However, due to circumstances that arose on the day, with Sukina falling ill, I was unable to interview both of them. Since they are both an integral part of Poetic Pilgrimage, it would have been insightful to get both their perspectives on the situation. Although Muneera did an excellent job of giving me a breakdown of the history of the group, their individual histories and experiences, it is inevitable that that their experiences would have be related differently. Interviewing them both would have added more

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[135] Gilliat-Ray 'Being there': The Experience of Shadowing a British Muslim Hospital Chaplain' *Qualitative Research* (Sage Publications, 2011) p.2.
[136] Bolognani 'Pakistanis' p.282.

substance to my findings, whilst allowing me to compare their experiences as individuals and a group. I was however able to speak to and observe Sukina in performance the night before, and therefore had an insight into her character and personality, although perhaps not as much as I would have liked. Saying that however, Muneera did manage to cover all my questions with great detail, and was confident in answering any queries I had.

Other Research methods.

Although the two research methods I applied in this ethnography are the most commonly used, there are other research methods, which if time had allowed, could have been used to give a better-rounded picture. For example, in her study on Muslim Chaplains, Gilliat Ray used shadowing as a method of enquiry.[137] Despite a lack of usage or mention of this technique in qualitative methods, Gilliat-Ray states it is an insightful way to gain knowledge about someone and the profession they work it. Showing the duo for a short or even long period of time could have given a detailed insight into how they go about their daily lives, from gig to gig and their community activities.

Other methods, which could have also been utilised, were in depth analysis of Poetic Pilgrimage's music videos and lyrics, which they now have two of. Although I did have a look at all their material and music when researching them online, exploring their content in more detail would have been revealing and insightful.

Triangulation

Many studies that utilise qualitative methods often triangulate with quantitative methods, in order to substantiate and verify findings. This is something that could have been done, by offering a short questionnaire style interview, in addition to getting numerical data such as for example, how many CD's they have sold or gigs they have played. Additionally, quantitative statistical data could have been used to extend the study into how they are received by their audiences, and

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[137] Gilliat-Ray 'Shadowing'

could include for example, a short survey could have been handed out after a performance.

Thus, as discussed above, looking back at the research process and the methodology that was followed, there are room for improvements in future studies. The main factor that limited the expansion of this study and inclusion of other research methods was time and space. Since this study was conducted as part of a master's degree, it was very limited in its scope. Nevertheless, it has managed to conduct a small and detailed study into the experiences and challenges of Poetic Pilgrimage, and by conducting an in-depth interview, and observation, much data was derived and analysed. Future studies could expand the scope of research and include by comparing the experiences of difference female hip-hop artists. Furthermore triangulation could also be used to connect both qualitative and quantitative methods, and expand to include more observations, interviews, content analysis, survey and perhaps even shadowing.

Analysis Process

Pfaffenberger states that 'the very richness of qualitative data, is in short, its bane'[138], and this is something which I found true during the analysis stage. One in-depth interview with Poetic Pilgrimage created almost 4000 words of data and transcribing was thus a tiring and lengthy process. Additionally, observation notes also equated to a large amount of data that needed reflecting on and coding. Nevertheless, for me this was the most exciting and crucial part of the study since it would deconstruct the data and allow me to critically evaluate not only what was said, but also what I saw during my observation. However, before coding my data I needed to choose which approach I would take and I will discuss this in more detail below.

Thematic Approach

There are many different types of social scientific approaches that one can take while analysing interviews, including semantic, narrative, holistic and thematic

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[138] Bryan Pfaffenberger *Microcomputer Applications in Qualitative Research* (Sage Publications, 1998) p. 12.

approaches.[139] The approach I chose was thematic and the reason for this was threefold. Firstly thematic analysis is excellent for clearly showing the different trends emerging from the data, gained through observation and interviews. Often interviews provide a wealth of data, and this is a clear way to manage and code what you have found. Secondly, thematic analysis is excellent for using comparatively, and therefore allows the researcher to see areas of common ground and also areas of divergence with others studies and literature. In the future if a similar study was to be conducted with other female Muslim artists, this method would make it easy to identify common and differing parts of the data. Thirdly, although there are computer aided tools that allow social science researchers to conduct this electronically[140], since this study is limited by time and space it was unfeasible to use such a programme, and thus analysis and coding was done manually. Therefore taking into consideration the absence of computer aided software; thematic analysis seemed a realistic choice.

After the analysis process, it was clear that there were certain themes and ideas that were quite prominent in the interview and the observation conducted with Poetic Pilgrimage. Through the research process I found both Sukina and Muneera to be articulate, educated and knowledgeable women who were clearly talented. Hence there were many themes that emerged reflecting the journey of Poetic Pilgrimage and the challenges and complicated reality they face as Muslims and women within the hip-hop genre. The most outstanding of these themes were related to identity, race and racism, gender, religion, education, music and conversion. The notes I took during my observation also reinforced and highlighted these categories, and I will now evaluate them one by one, whilst also seeking to contextualise them and place them within literature.

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[139] Uwe Flick *An Introduction to Qualitative Research* (Sage Publications, 1998) p.179.
[140] Eben Weitzman and Matthew Miles *Computer Programs for Qualitative Data Analysis* (Sage Publications, 1995) p.2.

<div align="center">**Findings, Discussion and Conclusion**</div>

Embracing your Identity

In the report on young British Muslims conducted by Ahmed, it states that young Muslims are faced with growing 'complexities around identity, belonging and citizenship'[141] which are contributing to what some would call an identity crisis. However when conducting my observation of Poetic Pilgrimage's performance at The Canteen, in Bristol I was struck by the confidence they displayed, not only in their musical ability but also their embodiment and character. They seemed at ease with who they were, and although the audience seemed to largely consist of non-Muslims, no apologies made for the cultural and religious influences that exist in their music and they did not change or adjust any of their lyrics for the audience. A more visual testament of this strong identity and character came across in the way both women dressed and how they carried themselves on stage.

They both wore bright coloured clothes including a long dress, loose trousers, a skirt and coloured scarves and accessories. Sukina wore a head wrap which seemed to echo the style adopted from Rastafarian culture, and indeed in the interview Muneera mentioned that although they are not anymore, 'her parents were rastas when she was born' and thus it could be perceived that she is still accepting of some of the culture she was raised in. Muneera had a scarf wrapped around her head, with large colourful earrings and there was no attempt to be mundane or dull from either of the women. Indeed when asked about this, Muneera stated, 'Do I have to wear a Saudi Arabian outfit if I don't live in the desert? No not really.' There was a clear acceptance of being British, Muslim and not having to cling onto what some regard as 'traditional' Islamic cultures. Indeed, Muneera went so far as to say that if reverts or others are insecure about their heritage they should research Islam in that country or culture, and not deny their history simply because it may not necessarily be known as a Muslim culture.

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[141] Sughra Ahmed 'Seen and Not heard: Voices of Young British Muslims' Policy *Research Centre* (Islamic Foundation, 2009) p. 47.

> It is important that converts feel like they don't have to completely negate their culture, because some reverts are like 'I am from Jamaica but I am a Muslim now so it doesn't matter', of course it does, God made you Jamaican you should embrace your culture and you should accept that.   (Muneera)

Indeed Islam is a global religion, and exists in many cultures, and has been interpreted and expressed in different ways since its conception. Even in the UK, evidence of Islam's diversity can be found by looking at early Muslim converts such as Abdullah Quilliam who as recent research by Geaves has shown, started the first mosque in Liverpool in 1889.[142] Further evidence of diversity can found in the different waves of Muslim immigrants to the country including those who arrived in port cities such as Cardiff in the early 19th century. In fact, as Gilliat-Ray and Mellor state, 'the diversity of the British Empire was reflected in the microcosm of most major British maritime ports'[143] and included Muslims from Yemen, Somalia, Bangladesh, and the Punjab amongst others. These communities were later by joined by arrivals from Asia, the Middle East and Europe in the 20th century.

However, more recently there have attempts from various parts of society including the media, politicians and even Muslims themselves to homogenise the Muslim community in the UK. Indeed, since the Rushdie Affair of 1989, the UK's 1.5 million Muslim population have been regarded as the same despite religious, ethnic and cultural differences. [144] This single view of Muslims through a religious identity is something, which Poetic Pilgrimage seemed to reject, whilst the diversity was something they emphasised. Muneera mentioned in the interview that they did not want to be labelled only in terms of their faith and be seen as one-dimensional but rather be known for what they do, i.e. their music and activism. The 'Islamic' hip-hop genre which Kalra, Miah and Khabeer discuss in their papers is seen as a limiting category. Muneera reiterated this in the interview stating:

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[142] Geaves *Islam in Victorian Britain: The lives and Times of Abdullah Quilliam* (Kube Publishing, 2010)
[143] Gilliat-Ray and Mellor 'Bilād' p.452.
[144] Jocelyne Cesari and Sean McLoughlin *European Muslims and the Secular State* (Ashgate, 2005) p. 54.

> I wanted to raise the bar, raise the level, so yes I am an artist, I am a Muslim, I am proud of these things, my gaze is Muslim, but I don't want to be a seen as a Muslim stuck in a community centre.
>
> (Muneera)

This coexistence of their multiple-identities, including their passion for the faith and hip-hop was clear from their performance. The scarves they wrapped on their heads were part of their faith and similarly, their rhymes, beats and swaying bodies demonstrated a commitment to their music. I found this fluidity of identity in their performance fascinating and wanted to know more about this seemingly effortless process and later in the interview learnt that their confidence was the product of a long journey of self-discovery.

In the interview, Muneera explained that there was no 'clash'[145] between being Jamaican, Caribbean, British, Muslim, Female and being a hip-hop artist. In the initial stages of group however, they did feel pressure to be part of an 'Islamic' music scene, which they have since moved away from. Muneera stated that a whole human being with various identities, not just a religious one. Indeed, she quoted a line from the Quran, which states, 'And we made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another'[146] in order to specifically highlight that being Muslim did not mean you lose your cultural identity or have to conform to one artistic genre.

Racism

Another theme and challenge that emerged from my research with Poetic Pilgrimage was the issue of racism that manifested itself both in terms of colour racism and Islamophobia. Whilst I was not surprised that colour racism still existed, the level to which it was experienced by Sukina and Muneera did disturb me, especially as a fellow Muslim. However from the interview, it was clear that the racism that the duo continues to experience is not one dimensional, and in fact comes from various sectors of society, including Muslims and non-Muslims.

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[145] Samuel Huntington *The Clash of Civilizations: And the Remaking of World Order* (Free Press, 2002)
[146] Yusuf Ali. 'Surah Al-Hujurat' *An English interpretation of the Holy Quran* (New York, 2001)

> Poetic Pilgrimage started off as a group that got much criticism, from Muslims, from the music hip-hop community, the Caribbean community who said why did you convert to Islam, you sold yourself, racist, and misogynists, we get so much slack from people, people who are racist and cruel and horrible, Muslims who are really cruel, Caribbean people who are cruel, and we have worked hard despite that.   (Muneera)

Thus it is clear that both women have been victims of Islamophobia, and also clear prejudice from within the Islamic community due to their dark skin colour. Indeed, Indeed, Islamophobia has existed since the conception of Islam and has surfaced as an area of discussion following the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent War on Terror. Fear mongering of Islam and its apparent incompatibility with Western values[147] is not uncommon and since Poetic Pilgrimage adopt a clear sign of their faith in the headscarf they wear on their head, some could find this as a reminder of Islam's presence in the UK, and thus contributing to the negativity geared towards them.

Additionally, both women faced racism from within the Islamic community despite the fact that Islam is a religion that includes all races and cultures. Indeed, a part of the reason Poetic Pilgrimage came to Islam was because of the equality they felt the religion offered every human being before God, which was reiterated by Muneera:

> "O Humankind! We have created you from male and female and have made you into peoples and tribes that you may know one another'   (The Holy Quran 49:13)

However racism is very real in the British Muslim population, which is dominated by community representatives from mostly South Asian or Arab backgrounds.[148] The Muslim Council of Britain for example, which claims representation of Muslims at a national and a political level, reflects a certain 'cultural capital'[149] and lacks diversity in its leading positions. Similarly, Black Muslim voices are absent in media, politics and popular discussions around Islam and also British Muslim organisations and institutions despite Islam's strong connection with Black history and identity.[150]

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[147] Tariq Modood 'The Liberal Dilemma: Integration of Vilification' *International Migration* (Blackwell, 2006) p. 6.
[148] Jocelyne Cesari and Sean McLoughlin *European Muslims and the Secular State* (Ashgate, 2005) p. 59.
[149] Ibid., p.60.
[150] Edward Curtis IV 'African-American Islamization Reconsidered: Black History Narratives and Muslim identity' *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (Oxford University, 2005) p.662.

Thus it was clear that as two Black, confident and outspoken women, Poetic Pilgrimage were challenging racism not just within Muslim Diaspora cultures but also non-Muslim Black cultures that may see Islam as foreign Arab religion. This struggle on both fronts is reiterated by Daigle, a Canadian Muslim convert who states that 'being Black and being Muslim is a double-bind. You have to face the Islamophobia of the general public, but particularly other Blacks, who seem to perceive Islam as an inauthentically Black religious option',[151] in addition to anti-Black racism from within Muslim communities. In the interview, Muneera's response to this challenge was defiant. 'We [Poetic Pilgrimage] work hard because we like it but also because it's important, it matters', and they were not going to be deterred by negativity from any front.

Being Female

Another of the most common themes throughout the interview was the issue of gender and femininity. Whilst being women didn't seem to have presented many barriers to the duo whilst performing at non-Muslim events, this did not always seem to be the case at Muslim organised events. Indeed, although they are one of the leading female Muslim hip-hop acts in the UK, Poetic Pilgrimage along with other female acts are virtually invisible and absent from mainstream Muslim TV channels, websites and events unlike their male counterparts. Indeed, while male artists such as Yusuf Islam, Sami Yusuf, and Maher Zain (who was present at the Living Islam Camp 2011) are household names, this is not the case with female Muslims artists.

A recent example of female Muslims artists being excluded from performing was at the Global Peace and Unity Event held in London in 2010.[152] Although the event claimed to be one of the largest gatherings of Muslims in Europe, it did not have one female Muslim musician in its evening concert and thus the extent to which the event was reflective of the diverse British community is questionable.

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[151] Chelby Daigle, 'Being Black, Being Muslim: Intersections and Contradictions' *The Woying Blog* (Wordpress, 2010) http://woyingi.wordpress.com/2010/07/21/being-black-being-muslim-intersections-and-contradictions

[152] This was a two-day event organised by the Islam Channel was said to be the largest gathering of Muslims in Europe.

Artists like Jermaine Jackson whose music career cannot be deemed as strictly 'Islamic', were invited to speak and treated with 'Muslim celebrity' like status. Conversely, British female artists with a track record of meaningful music and working with the Muslim community were not invited to perform. This highlights the double standards that exist when it comes to the treatment of male and female artists in such events. Indeed while Muneera did express discontentment at such Islamic organisations, she reiterated that Poetic Pilgrimage were not deterred by such opinions.

> I don't really care whether I am on the stages of global peace and unity, but what I do know is that they need to represent youth and women, females, the first women to go onto that stage apart from the sign language women was a comedian, what about singers, what about rappers, in fact why are most of your artists not even from this country and not even from Europe.   (Muneera)

The debate regarding women in the public sphere is a regular discussed topic in scholarly circles and the Muslim community. Khabeer notes that 'certain legal opinions prohibit musical performances by women or advise that lyrics refer only to strictly religious topics'[153] however there are others that disagree with this opinion. For example Imam Talib Abdur-Rashid of the Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood in New York City, also known as the 'Hip-hop Imam' claims that such strict opinions are contradicted by other Islamic sources.[154] Others including those of the feminist traditions would go further to say such teachings have been fabricated to prevent women from being vocal the public life.[155]

Indeed during my observation, I couldn't help note how rare it is to see to visibly Muslim women performing hip-hop to a mixed audience and I wanted to know more about the response from the Muslim community. From what I gathered in the interview, the reaction they have had has been mixed and largely dependent

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[153] Khabeer 'Rep' p.130.,
[154] Andrea Elliot 'Between Black and Immigrant Muslims, an Uneasy Alliance' (New York Times, 2007)
[155] Barlas *Believing* p.

on different traditions. This can be said to be a reflection of the diversity of the British Muslim community in the UK.[156]

For example, although there is a vocal minority which rejected their performances, there were also some parts of the community that were incredibly supportive of Poetic Pilgrimage. Talking of one of their first performances, Muneera stated:

> It was so new for female to be on stage, we performed in a Mawlid, we were the first women who have ever been on that stage in front of rows of different scholars and it was really intense, and someone shouted 'haram!', but on the flip side, everyone was like to him get out and told them off, and everyone was really supportive.
>
> (Muneera)

This shows that the scholars present at the Mawlid event were not only accepting of women performing in front of a mixed audience, but in fact supportive and encouraging of them doing so. In fact Muneera talked extensively about a particular scholar called Shaykh Babikir Ahmed Babikir, from the Radical Middle Way[157] project, who even went to the length of writing articles in support of the duo, including religious justification and support of women in performance and music

> We have had scholars supporting us, Shaykh Babikir, he is very supportive of us… we have never been insecure and shaky about ourselves in Islam as musicians; we have some people who are supportive and some who are not.   (Muneera)

Therefore it is clear that there are a variety of opinions in the Muslim community when it comes to the issue of women performing music publically. However, as Muneera stressed in the interview, many Muslims she had spoken to were not actually opposed to female performers, and it was the 'vocal minority' who propagate such opinions. Indeed, even Dr Daud Abdullah from The Muslim Council of Britain, a supposed moderate representation of British Muslims claimed that he

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[156] 'Summary Report: Understanding Muslim ethnic Communities' (Communities and Local Government, 2009) p.37.
[157] The Radical Middle Way project was founded after the 7/7 attacks and seeks to promote a moderate understanding of Islam. For more information see www.radicalmiddleway.org

was not supportive of female performers because 'these objections are based on the Islamic view that women should not draw unnecessary attention to themselves'.[158]

Needless to say, the debate surrounding Muslim women in music will only continue to become more relevant at a time when more women are turning to music as a way of expressing themselves. As we have seen, women like Poetic Pilgrimage are challenging the 'old-school mentality… that women really don't belong in performing arts'.[159] Through hip-hop such rigid definitions of Islam are being reformed by Muslim women who are 'creating new meanings and interesting spaces of resistance through mixing faith and hip-hop culture.'[160]

Hip-Hop as a Tool

Another theme that was evident during the research conducted was the idea that hip-hop can be a tool for social change. During the interview it was mentioned that Poetic Pilgrimage came together firstly because of their love of music and hip-hop, but also their desire to promote positive Black female role models.

> What we realised when talking is there wasn't a lot of positive black female role models in music in general of our age coming from a Caribbean heritage, in hip-hop especially , there is Estelle, who is obviously very good but there is no diversity so we thought we could add something to it. (Muneera)

Indeed, Peoples argues that hip-hop has the 'radical and liberating potential' to change the nature of hip-hop as a means to 'speak to younger feminists',[161] which is especially important as a time when that such a when the mainstream music industry is highly sexualised. The fame of female artists such as Nicky Minaj, Estelle, and Beyonce can be attributed to their sexuality as much as their music. A study by the American Psychological Association has shown that women are more 'frequently

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[158] Motune 'Sing'
[159] Ibid.,
[160] McMurray 'Hotep' p.75.
[161] Whitney Peoples 'Under Construction' Identifying Foundations of Hip-Hop Feminism and Exploring Bridges *Meridians :Feminism, Race and Transnationalism* (Indiana University Press, 2007) p.20.

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than men are presented in provocative and revealing clothing'[162] in music videos, while the most sexually degrading lyrics were found in the realm of hip-hop, rap and R&B.[163]

Khabeer also notes that 'heavy emphasis on "bling bling" (materialism) and "bagging honies" (sexual relations with women)' have taken the emphasis away from hip-hops 'concern with other topics' such as social justice'.[164] In light of this, Poetic Pilgrimage felt it was important to show an alternative narrative to 'smoking, drinking, having premarital sex and using disrespectful language'[165], which as McMurray notes has become associated with hip-hop. Instead they want to show that women can be successful in hip-hop and the music industry in general without the need to exploit their sexuality and succumb to the materialistic ideology that it said to promote.

In addition to encouraging positive role models, both Sukina and Muneera strongly felt hip-hop could also be a platform from which young dissatisfied British Muslim youths could express themselves. Indeed hip-hop from the very beginning gave young disenfranchised people 'a cultural-political space'[166] which is something Peoples also claims in her historical analysis of the genre. She argues that hip-hop always allowed a space where young Black men and women could 'express their race and ethnic identities and to critique racism'[167] and in the age where many young Muslims may have experiences Islamophobia, this is quite potent.

In keeping with this tradition of hip-hop described in literature, Poetic Pilgrimage want to use it address social problems within the Muslim and wider community. Like Mos Def, and other hip-hop artists, they recognise the impact hip-hop can have.

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[162] Zurbriggen e al 'APA Task Force on the Sexualisation of Girls' *American Psychological Association* (APA, 2007) p.5.
[163] Ibid. p.6.
[164] Khabeer 'Rep' p.127.
[165] McMurray 'Hotep' p.88.
[166] Aidi 'Marginality' p.16.
[167] Peoples 'Construction' p.21.

> Some people began to realise on a social level a lot of young Muslims were no engaged in society, the same way we had a lot of politics thrown at us, we were supposed to put this cloak on its a lot to deal with, they can't deal with that so they were angry, with dual identities   (Muneera)

Muneera explained that there had been cases where the very people they had initially received strong criticism from, had changed their opinions once they realised hip-hop was a successful way of engaging a disconnected youth. Indeed Alim claims that 'Hip Hop music, from its inception, has been an active vehicle for social protest in the U.S. and around the world'[168] thus highlighting its importance as a tool of communication. It was through hip-hop that issues such as issues such as identity, race, and culture were explored in addition to injustice, poverty and history. Poetic Pilgrimage also found it was a platform from which radical ideas could also be confronted and challenged instead of being swept under the carpet.

Therefore the reason behind the existence of Poetic Pilgrimage is much deeper than simply being out of enjoyment or even related to money and popularity, as mainstream music artists are. If monetary gain was a priority, then Poetic Pilgrimage would perhaps have retired from the music scene a long time ago. From what I interpreted in the interview, most of their performances involve little money or are unpaid. Muneera mentioned that finances proved to be difficult sometimes, and that Sukina had recently started a part-time job, while she was still looking for one.

> Pilgrimage are not a 'big blinging' group, we don't spend money on ourselves with flash cars, and expensive items.
> (Muneera)

Indeed, even though Muneera described Poetic Pilgrimage as not 'big blinging', there was a sense of contentment that came across despite obvious financial strains. Positivity radiated from Muneera during the interview and was something I also felt during the performance. I got the feeling that they both are more concerned about the task they have at hand and the messages they want to convey through their music as opposed to making it in a 'multimillion dollar industry'.[169] This is what makes them a likeable but also a powerful force in the hip-hop world.

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[168] Alim 'Verbal' p.49.
[169] Khabeer 'Rep' p.127.

Education and Empowerment

I felt that this theme ran throughout the findings of my research with Poetic Pilgrimage. Both Sukina and Muneera are educated women who studied at universities in London. More importantly however, they had an in-depth understanding of contemporary issues such as global war and conflict, injustice and politics, including both domestic issues such as the cuts to public funding and education. This knowledge came across strongly in the interview, and also in their performance. The idea of educating their listeners and exposing them to history through their music was strongly linked to the idea of empowerment. Peoples also claims that 'hip-hop has emerged as a generational and culturally relevant vehicle' though which female hip-hop artists can spread their message of 'critical analysis and empowerment'[170] and so in this sense, one can describe them as social activists. Both women demonstrated detailed knowledge of history, especially in relation to the history of Black civilisations including the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, and also the connection between Islam and Black cultures.

> America was built of the backs of slavery, the slaves were Muslims, Islam and Muslims have always been there, its such a part of the society… even in the civil rights movement, Muslims were so instrumental in fighting and making a change.   Muneera)

It was evident that both Sukina and Muneera felt that not only was Black contribution to history overlooked, but also Black Muslim contribution was barely heard of. Writer Hassaballa emphasises this fact, including the lack of knowledge of the civil rights movement and states that all 'All Americans - including many in the Muslim community - have benefited tremendously from their sacrifice'.[171] Like Poetic Pilgrimage he reiterates the fact that community activists in the past were not just fighting for rights for only Black people or Muslims, but for people as a whole. Similarly, Muneera stated that the British Muslim community should also be working

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[170] Peoples 'Construction' p.25.
[171] Hesham Hassaballa 'Reflect and Reunite' (Alt Muslim Comment, 2011) www.altmuslim.com/a/a/a/4184

for society as a whole and the betterment of humanity as opposed to sticking to their religious or cultural communities.

It was clear in the interview that Muneera felt strongly about the need or Muslims to do more to reach out to the wider community. She felt that the 7/7 terror attacks in London which coincided with her and Sukina's conversion to Islam, was a pivotal event for British Muslims. This is because it highlighted a lack of activism and involvement of the Muslim community with wider society, which they felt was present more in America Muslim cultures.

> Even after having such a long presence in England, no one ever said I am a Muslim I have a mosque, come visit me one day…no one actually was open with their Islam.   (Muneera)

Hence at a time when they were dealing with redefining their identity as new Muslims, 7/7 also forced them to reconsider the aims and goals of their hip-hop career as they recognised a need to change the way Muslims engaged with wider society. The passion both Sukina and Muneera have on this subject is embodied by their regular involvement with their local communities. They regularly participate in workshops for young children as well as being actively involved in Black History Month and International Women's Day on an annual basis.

Thus as we can see from the findings above, there were many pertinent issues that were highlighted in the research, which were explored in detail thematically. Some of these themes gave us an insight into the lives of Poetic Pilgrimage, whilst others gave us an idea of the challenges that they had faced personally and also professionally as hip-hop music artists from both within and outside the Muslim community. Muneera stated in the interview their experiences of being female Muslims in hip-hop were largely shaped by a combination of factors including race and gender. Indeed, through their involvement with hip-hop, they

were challenging the 'construction of women as silent'[172] beings and this was the cause of a large amount of negativity they faced.

Poetic Pilgrimage felt that some people regarded Black women performing hip-hop as the 'the end of the world'. Similarly, McMurray argues that it is almost 'unfathomable' for some 'that Black Muslim women would have any involvement with hip-hop music'[173] due to the strict distinctions between the social role of men and women prevalent in Islamic thought. Khabeer's interview with MissUndastood emphasised this discomfort with female performers which was expressed by both men and women in the Muslim community due to their perception that the 'ideal Muslim women should not be vocal in the public sphere'.[174]

However, the issue that arose most strongly from the research process was the complicated reality of identity construction in general, and its relationship with hip-hop. From the interview and observation that took place, it was clear Muslim identities 'intersect and interact with other identifications'[175], and are therefore fluid and ever-changing. Although Poetic Pilgrimage saw themselves as Muslims which they regarded as an important aspect of their identity, they openly refused to be defined solely through this lens. Thus despite Kalra, Miah and Khabeer's research on Muslims in hip-hop being framed as part of an 'Islamic music'[176] genre, Sukina and Muneera saw themselves as part of the wider genre of hip-hop that emerged in the 1970's. Poetic Pilgrimage felt inspired by their religion like many well-known hip-hop artists such as Mos Def and McMurray, who stated that despite not being explicitly 'Islamic' her songs reflected 'the spirit of resistance in hip-hop culture in ways that are tied to my faith'.[177] Muneera emphasised this fact repeatedly throughout the interview, and clarified they would rather define themselves as having 'a slight Muslim gaze'.

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[172] Judith Tucker *Women Family and Gender in Islamic Law* (Cambridge University Press, 2008) p. 31.
[173] McMurray 'Hotep' p.74.
[174] Khabeer 'Rep' p.132.
[175] Cara Aitchison *Geographies of Muslim identities: Diaspora, Gender and Belonging* (Ashgate, 2007) p.7.
[176] Miah and Kalra 'Kool' p. 14.
[177] McMurray 'Hotep' p.83.

For me this was the most revealing part of the study because it challenged the preconceptions that I held about Poetic Pilgrimage and their music in the initial stages of this project. From previous knowledge I had about them, including the fact they were converts to Islam and had performed as some 'Islamic' events, I erroneously assumed that they would be happy to be categorised as such. This assumption was furthered by the embodiment of both Sukina and Muneera who wear a headscarf. However it became clear in the interview that the headscarf had a 'multiplicity of meanings attached to it'[178] including being a symbol of personhood, cultural belief, national identity as well as religion.

Thus, I found that there was a big 'distinction between the nominal and self-affirmed identity'[179] of the duo and felt the need to adjust my literature review accordingly. Furthermore, since qualitative methods aim to give participants a chance to narrate their own experiences, I felt compelled by this principle to explore this journey of self-identification that had come to light. Muneera explained that they had come 'full circle' on the issue of their identity and categorisation and were now happy to be regarded as female hip-hop artists, who are also Muslim. This is opposed to trying to fit into the Islamic category, which they did in the initial stages of their hip-hop career.

One of the reasons behind this change in self-identification is the racism which the duo faced from within and outside the Islamic community. Although Islam is a religion that encompasses many races and cultures, where all Muslims are said to part of a global and imagined community, the Ummah,[180] the idea that this shared Islamic identity 'transcends ethnic, racial, linguistic and national identities'[181] is indeed an idealistic one. Colour racism has existed in all civilisations and Islamic cultures have been no different. The Arab slave trade for example was similar to the transatlantic slave trade in that Black slaves were imprisoned against their will and used for domestic labour. Wright argues that '... Islamic law and practice made no

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[178] Sonya Fernandez 'The crusade over the bodies of women' in *Anti-Muslim Prejudice* ed. Maleiha Malik (Routledge, 2010) p.66.
[179] Christopher Charles 'Skin Bleaching, Self-Hate, and Black Identity in Jamaica' *Journal of Black Studies* (Sage Publications, 2003) p.713.
[180] Benedict Anderson *Imagined Communities* (Verso Books, 1991)
[181] Geaves *'Ummah'* p. 10.

provision for the abolition of slavery and the slave trade'[182] and that trading Black slaves continued right through to the Ottoman Empire since they were seen as economic investments.

Servitude continues to exist in our contemporary world including Muslim countries whilst dark skin still had a very real connection with low social standing.[183] Furthermore even within some Black cultures, there is an inbred notion of the superiority of fairer skin and this is proven in the wide use of harmful skin bleaching products.[184] Charles states that this demonstrates the 'deep-rooted and physiological scars of slavery in particular and colonisation in general',[185] and these colour value systems can be said to have been internalised by many migrant communities in the UK.[186] Thus even within the Islamic community, Poetic Pilgrimage have felt racist sentiment towards them, which has contributed towards them moving away from such a label.

Additionally this change in self-identification can be explained within the context of their own personal spiritual growth, confidence in their musical ability and also their future aspirations. Due to the diversity of the Islamic community and the variety of traditions that exist in the UK, the place of women in music and what is defined as 'Islamic' or not is constantly debated. Indeed some interpretations see the 'very sound of the female voice as a provocation to be forbidden in public space'[187], despite Hallaq's examples of Muslim women being vocal in both the public and private spheres of medieval Muslim societies.[188]

Thus by removing themselves from such a contentious category, Poetic Pilgrimage has lifted religious and cultural limitations that could have restricted their artistic scope. Indeed, Poetic Pilgrimage did not want to simplify rise up to the glass ceiling in the Muslim community, but wanted to 'raise the bar and raise the level' of their music beyond this category. This in turn has allowed them to stay true to the

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[182] John Wright *The Trans-Saharan Slave Trade* (London and New York, Routledge, 2007) p.5.
[183] Charles 'Bleaching' p.712.
[184] Ibid.,
[185] Ibid.,
[186] Margaret Hunter 'If You're Light You're Alright' *Gender & Society* (Sage Publications, 2002) p.176.
[187] Tucker 'Gender' p.30.
[188] Wael Hallaq 'An Introduction to Islamic Law' (Cambridge University Press, 2009) p.7.

original meaning behind the emergence of hip-hop, which was to provide a space to express multiple identities whilst also challenging society and structures of domination. In this sense then, it can be said that their identity as a hip-hop act is clearly linked to their female, Afro-Caribbean, British, and Muslim identities equally.

Thus in conclusion is it is apt to say that this ethnographic research project has revealed more than just the lives and challenges of Poetic Pilgrimage. It has highlighted a problem with the issue of nominal identification and categorisation of Muslims in contemporary Britain, which is often removed from self-affirmed identities as we have seen. Indeed, homogenising such a diverse community has become increasingly common in the media, politics, and also in research despite Muslims being 'neither ethnically not ideologically homogenous'.[189]

Muslim and non-Muslims have been guilty of such categorisation following the Rushdie Affair of 1989, which acted a 'cultural marker'[190] overshadowing any ethnic or racial affiliation for Muslims. The shift from race to religion was enforced by the media and politicians, but also provided the landscape for individuals to 'stake a claim for the leadership of British Muslims and to present themselves as their true representatives'.[191] Muneera openly challenged these 'so-called community leaders'[192] in the interview stating, that 'they don't represent me' and reaffirmed the fact that she felt a vocal minority had taken over the discourse of Muslims in Britain. Indeed, although religion is important in the lives of many British Muslims, Muneera argued other identities such as culture, race and gender are equally important to make a 'full human being'. As a result of such homogenisation, ordinary Muslims have not been given the opportunity to speak up and assert themselves and their identity to the world.

However in this study, qualitative research methods have allowed us to hear the experiences of two British Muslim women 'from their own perspective and in

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[189] Humayum Ansari *The Infidel Within: Muslims in Britain since 1800* (Hurst & Co Publishers, 2004) p.2.
[190] Saied Ameli and Arzu Merali 'Dual Citizenship: British, Islamic or both?' *Islamic Human Rights Commission* (IHRC, 2004) p.10.
[191] Kenan Malik *From Fatwa to Jihad: The Rushdie Affair and Its Legacy* (Atlantic Books, 2009) p.5.
[192] Ibid., p.7.

their own words'.[193] By using in-depth interviewing and direct observation, I have been able to see how Poetic Pilgrimage 'balance structures in Islam with hip-hop culture'[194] in order to create spaces of expression. Within these spaces they are able to articulate their multiple identities confidently and thus challenge one-dimensional religious representation of Muslim. Furthermore, they use hip-hop to confront the 'bling bling' culture and degradation of women in the hip-hop industry and in turn promote positive Black female role models. In the future, a wider range of qualitative approaches including triangulation with quantitative methods can be used to substantiate this study further. Also, the notion of identity and experiences of Muslim women in hip-hop could be explored comparatively with more than one case study.

Indeed, hip-hop is a powerful medium with a strong relationship with Islam and Muslims. Although it has been largely regarded as the domain of men, there are an increasing amount of Muslim women like Poetic Pilgrimage in the hip-hop scene and so their 'personal struggles'[195] deserve more attention from the academic world. In the case of Muneera and Sukina, despite facing various challenges, hip-hop is their tool for creating social change, and this is just the beginning.

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[193] Kvale *Interviewing* p.1.
[194] McMurray 'Hotep' p.74.
[195] Alim 'Networks' p. 271.

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