
Understanding Great Britain: A Case Study of Britain's Asiam Female Muslim Population

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Abstract

This qualitative case study research project examines the perceptions towards Muslim women in Great Britain after 2001. This study is based upon a historical framework that seeks to determine the historical developments of perceptions, both positive and negative,—after determining what said perceptions were—that ranged across all aspects of life: the political, social, public, and private. The women in this study range, in majority, from Pakistan, and are anchored in its discussion about young Muslim women ranging from 18 years of age to 30 years of ages that reside in Great Britain.

This qualitative case study answers one main research question that serves as an umbrella effect for the smaller four subset questions that guided and constrained this project. These questions reveals an extreme lack of discussion about the different and distinct experiences of Muslim women from Muslim men living in the West, specifically Great Britain for the constraints of this paper, the almost complete lack of appearance of Muslim women in the public sphere, especially women whom chose to wear the veil. These findings are supported by evidence collected from many forms of media, demographic and statistical evidence all of whom is based and firmed by modern scholarship.

The findings of this study revealed key conclusions: 1) There is complete absence of Muslim women outside of the veil issue; 2) Muslim women are seen as a threat to “Western lifestyle” and 3) gives insight into the growing Islamic Feminist Movement through the actions of young Muslim women. Through the use of literature, media, politics, and the historical process this study focuses on the perceptions towards Muslim women in all walks of life.

Introduction

The 1979 Iranian Revolution, or more commonly known as the Islamic Revolution, has had a lasting and continual impact on the external and internal of the Islamic and non-Islamic nation-states and societies. Since the Islamization politics of Ayatollah Khomeini, Western society and politics have been laden by growing and intensifying fears of Islam—through the help of 9/11, the London Bridge bombings, and the Madrid bombings—that have helped in creating and establishing racial and ethnic tensions and stereotypes. This continual process and issue known as Islamophobia, leads on to the problem embedded in this case study: the negative perceptions towards Muslim women in Great Britain.

This study does not follow the belief that Muslim women are a threat to the society and culture of the West but seeks to understand why and in what fashion Muslim women in Great Britain are seen as a problem and in what ways are they discussed. This problem is exaggerated b the lack of information in sources that focus on the experiments of Muslim women in the West; except for cases relating to the various forms of the veil—the hijab, naqib, burka, etc.

Purpose of Proposed Research and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore and understand the historical process and development of perceptions, negative and positive, towards Muslim women in Great Britain in seeking to better understand British perceptions to all “Black” immigrants within Great Britain. This study also generally and broadly explored said perceptions towards Caribbean, African, Indian, and other Asian immigrants to Great Britain. This study is not interested in the reasons behind why European Muslim women chose to veil themselves or the important implications said actions have on British, and more globally the larger Western society. Instead this research only focuses on the perceptions towards young Muslims—veiled and unveiled—which involves an understanding of said women themselves but all an understanding of the perpetrators of the perceptions—negative and positive—towards these women.

Taken as a case study, Great Britain allowed this research to better understand the specific and diverse cultures and societies within the Islamic Diaspora through the constraints of the following research questions:

1. What is the demographic makeup of the Muslim population in Great Britain?
2. What, if any, are the perceptions towards Muslims in Great Britain? Muslim women?
3. How are Muslim women depicted in the public sphere? The political?
4. How does modern scholarship address the issue of Muslim women in Great Britain?

Taken together, these three questions fall under a larger and broader umbrella questions: What, if any, are the perceptions, positive and negative, towards young Muslim women in Great Britain.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study can be summarized into three topics and themes

1. Affects on political decision-making
2. Islamic Diaspora and Islamophobia
3. Growing Fundamentalism

Affects on Political Decision-Making

Since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the Western population has become constantly and consistently enamored with images of a growing fundamentalist Middle East with little to no positive feeling towards the governments and peoples of Western societies. This sparked an interest, in said Western societies, in gaining more knowledge about Middle Eastern politics, society, and culture so that proper Foreign affairs decisions can be made about how to properly handle one's nation's self interest while still gaining partnerships in international politics.

Islamic Diaspora and Islamophobia

While Islam is the second largest religion in the world with one billion plus self identifiers; members of this Diaspora also identify with Islam according to cultural and ethnic definitions. This research and those similar seek to understand this large and eclectic population. By understanding the differences and similarities within this population, researchers and politicians will then be able to better understand the environment in which Islamic fundamentalism becomes appealing to members of this population; especially members living in Western nations and societies.

Growing Fundamentalism

The recent actions of the Christmas underwear bomber (www.bbcnews.com) has shown that Islamic fundamentalism is becoming more and more attractive to peoples that have historically been considered "immune" to such tactics and beliefs. Fundamentalism is spreading. American citizens, European citizens, children of non-fundamentalism families and backgrounds, peoples whom the police would never consider as potential suicide bombers have become attracted to extremist groups. This is a major problem that must be researched and understood so that: 1) a better understanding can occur of this large and diverse population and 2) the fight against these extremist groups can continue and hopefully result in less human casualties.

Researches like this and many others seek to understand this drastic and very fatal shift and how to combat the growing interest in Islamic Fundamentalism.

Definitions

The following definitions, most of which are used very commonly, are the meanings of these words when used in context of this research and paper.

Muslim – an individual that religiously, culturally, and/or ethnically defines himself/herself as Muslim.

Islamic Fundamentalism – refers to Sunni or Shiite extremist groups and/or non-governmental institutions that promote martyrdom tactics towards Western peoples/cultures/societies/etc..

Great Britain – all lands belonging to that of the United Kingdom: England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland.

Islamophobia – the fear that Islam (its beliefs and practices), especially in its extremist fundamentalist form, will "infect" ones Western society and permanently change the government, peoples, culture, society, and landscape of that nation.

Analysis and Discussion of the Literature and Presentation of Analytic Framework

Primary Sources

The qualitative part of my research involved the use of primary and secondary sources. The use of primary sources (tabloids, newspapers, blogs and websites) allowed for me to get an in-depth look at the minds of Britons. As primary source documents tell a lot about a population and what is deemed important enough to spend money and time on printing and writing about it.

Tabloids and Newspapers

During my research, I spent a lot of time analyzing the following UK tabloids: “Mirror”, and “The Sun”. While reading the stories and comments made by viewers of these three different tabloids a few similarities became apparent: 1) the intended audience for said tabloids, 2) the lack of information on people of color and 3) lack of information and anything with Islam.

As one reads through each respective website it becomes glaring obvious that these sites are geared towards male Britons specifically White male Britons. This is important because of the nature of the tabloid business. The point of these tabloids are to make money from as much people as possible, therefore, by limiting the intended audience of the literary I was able to conclude that: 1) there is an inherent bias within British culture towards anyone who is not White male Briton and 2) by limiting their intended audience the owners and editors of these tabloids allow me to determine that Muslim women are not deemed and audience in which profit can be made.

Secondly, the lack of information on/towards people of color gives us insight into British culture and society that is very important in this research. This lack of information shows that people of color, who do make up a considerable amount of the British population, are not a viable audience. This is an important point because it leads us to understand that while Britain is a mixed culture and society, there still exists bias and racism that affect day to day life. The above points lead to the question of so what? Why should I care about British bias towards people of color in a research project on Muslim women? The answer leads us to our next point.

The above points allows me to point one more conclusion, that since tabloids are catered towards White male Britons and there is a major absence of people of color there will be little to no content/information about Islam in general or Muslim women specifically. As my research took me further and further into these tabloids my hypothesis proved correct. There was no information about or towards Muslim women. This lack of information gives us just as much, if not more, information about British culture. Tabloids reflect the current trends and consistent interest of a culture and nation, therefore because there is no information about Muslim women—who do make up an important part of British population—shows these women are deemed unimportant and unnecessary to the common arena of British society and therefore no discussion, negative or positive is necessary.

Blogs and websites

After gaining such important information from researching UK tabloids, I sought more information to confirm or deny my results I took the next step and begin investigating blogs and websites ranging across different topics and themes. While researching the blogs, my result mirrored that the information found from researching the tabloids. However, while researching certain websites, I came across websites centered on Neo-Nazism and KKK-like beliefs and agendas. These sites were informative in their nature due to the information that was present and not present. The deemed “enemies” of the United Kingdom, according to the writers and producers of these sites, were any non-White Britons who according to these sites had no right to be there. The constraints of this research is not interested in the personal and political beliefs of said groups, however, one particular behavior pattern of these groups is important to this research project: the tendency to connect Islam with Muslim males. This behavior is very important for this research because of the removal of Muslim women from the forefront of said groups’ discussions.

Topic Two: Secondary Sources

Finding and analyzing primary source document, while important and necessary for the legitimacy of this project, made up only fifty percent of the literary sources. The use of modern scholarship serves two main and important purposes. First, by finding, researching and analyzing documents/books/texts/ journal articles I was able to determine if the conclusions and findings determined from an analysis of the primary sources documents discussed above accurate and sound. Secondly, secondary source documents are important in a research project of this nature because it is of

the utmost importance for I to be in discourse with members of higher education especially in fields that discuss information dealing with the topic of this research.

Strengths, Limitations, and Implications of Literature

While researching and analyzing both primary and secondary source documents, my research was strengthened by the in-depth discourse on Islam, its impact and implications and Western societies, real and imagined and so forth. However, after much researching and analysis I found that a major gap in the literature existed surrounding scholarly discourse on the impact of Muslim women on Western society, real or imagined and positive or negative, that limited that amount of information gained throughout this project. The reasons behind this gap in the literature is not important at this stage in the research, however, what is important is that this gap exists. Outside of the overwhelming information found on Muslim women and the various forms of the veil, this gap in literature limited the nature of the researching in terms of its ability to discourse with the scholarly environment.

Research Design and Methodology

Purpose of Proposed Research and Proposed Research Questions

The purpose of my proposed research is three fold. Firstly, this research is important for its impact on the research community because it will add to the continuing discourse in said community about the growing impact and implications of Islam in the Middle East and North Africa as well as its growing appearance in Western societal landscapes. By posing this research interest and its subsequent research questions this project was able to successfully pose, conduct, research, analyze and present findings that adds to the numerous amount of research already done and possible future research.

Secondly, as an undergraduate student vastly interested in the implications of Islam outside of the Arabian Peninsula, this research project stemmed from a growing and intensifying interest in “non-traditional Islam.” By using the phrase “non-traditional Islam” I seek to veer away from the belief system held by many, whom are greatly ignorant of Islam, that “traditional Islam” equates with tanned men with long beards speaking Arabic and pronouncing the name of Allah before a bomb was set off. By us “non-traditional Islam” I put into words my desire to learn more about a population that follows a set of rules and edicts dictated by religious, cultural, ethnic and gender-specific boundaries that has since Islam’s conception become intertwined and in some cases blurred. As a historian, I must here make the clarification that these boundaries and their dilution over time are not specific to Islam and that Islam follows a patten similar to that followed by the other two great monotheistic religions, Judaism and Christianity, with Islam being the “child” of the trio.

Finally, the purpose of this purposed research was to educate the masses. As with things in higher education, the experts are those who have devoted years to immersing themselves in the literature and have been in discourse with scholars and other experts, however, those who are not involved in higher education or are not interested or invested in the topic, or those similar, of this project fall into the category of the masses. This project, like many others, seeks to be in direct discourse with members in higher education but also seeks to inform members of the masses about a population and topic that is negatively sensationalized in Western societies.

The purpose of the research questions served to create proper boundaries for this project. By posing questions that were the perfect mixture of general and specific for the time constraints of this project, I was able to ask appropriate questions of which I could and did answer at the conclusion of my research.

Literature Sources and Methods for Analyzing the Literature

Researching involves undertaking the task of not only finding sources and literature but also analyzing what was found and what was not found. Gaining my sources from peer reviewed journal articles, websites and blogs, newspapers and tabloids, and books I analyzed the literature with the following criteria:

1. Does this literary sources discussion topics pertaining to my topic?
2. Does this source hold a discussion about Islam? Islam in Great Britain?
3. Does this source enlighten me about: Islam, Muslim women, Great Britain, Britons, political and social structures of Great Britain’s immigrant population?
4. Is this source gender specific?

5. Does this source hold a discussion about Muslim women? If so, what is said and in what context? If not, why is not said and why?
6. Where did the author of this source gain its primary and secondary source information?
7. Does this source hold Muslim women in a positive or negative light?
8. Are Muslim women discussed? In what context are Muslim women discussed?
9. By using these questions I was able to shift through the eclectic amount of literature having to do with my research so that I could focus properly and specifically as well as properly analyze the texts.

Anticipated Limitations of Future Research

At the conclusion of this research project I was able to determine that future research on this topic or topics similar will encounter limitations in the literature. While the interest in Islam has greatly increased in the last thirty years much of this discussion deals solely with a discussion about the “Islamic experience” from the male perspective. As men and women are inherently different and experience different modes of social and cultural indoctrination. These inherent differences will hinder future research specific to Muslim women and their inherent experiences.

Findings, Conclusions and Recommendations for Future Research

Findings from the Literature Related to the Proposed Research Questions

Findings from this research can be properly analyzed and explained through the understanding of each individual question.

Question One: What is the demographic make-up of the Muslim population in Great Britain?

According to the UK mid-2003 report, the United Kingdom has a total population of 59.6 million people; of Christianity is the largest religious group with 71.5% self-identifiers with Islam being the second. This data is important because it shows that this research project has a Muslim population in Great Britain in which to study.

This study focuses on the Asian Muslim population in Great Britain. Again relying on literature, I was able to focus my research on Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Indian Muslims.

Question Two: What, if any, are the perceptions towards Muslims in Great Britain? Muslim women?

By breaking down these perceptions towards Muslims into two categories I was able to see if there were any actions/reactions to Muslims as a whole and then compare and contrast those holistic actions to only Muslim women, my interest group. Through researching the primary and secondary literature I was able to determine that perceptions towards Muslims in the public and political sphere were surrounded around Muslim males and their supposed threat to British society.

When seeking to understand if any perceptions towards Muslim women existed I found a gap in both my primary and secondary sources. There was little talk surrounding Muslim women and their impact on British society even though they represented a good portion of the second largest religious group in Great Britain. This lack of information shows that Muslim women are deemed unimportant to the greater society: they are neither a threat nor a friend, they are placed in the neutral and ambiguous middle where little conversation is done about them except on the issue of the veil.

Question Three: How are Muslim women depicted in the public sphere? The political?

The depiction of Muslim women in Great Britain can be categorized into two major headings: ambiguously and negatively. Firstly, the depiction of Muslim women in the public sphere is ambiguous in nature due to the lack of discussion about said women. This lack creates a gray area in British society; Muslim women are a major part of British society and yet they lack public discussion, negative or positive, about this population group which shows their ambiguous place in society. In other words, Muslim women are members of British society but because there is little discussion about them in tabloids and news papers I am able to see the true nature of British society and culture versus that of population statistics.

Secondly, the depiction of Muslim women in the political sphere tends to veer towards negative discussion and Muslim women and the veil. As has become glaringly evident, Muslim women who chose to veil themselves are seen as a major threat to Western society and thought. Whether or not this line of thinking is correct is outside of the scope of

this project, however, this project does deal with the fact that such discussion and line of thinking exists. In other words, because British society believes that Muslim women who chose to veil themselves are a threat, negative perceptions are created and intensified towards Muslim women in Great Britain.

Question Four: How does modern scholarship address the issue of Muslim women in Great Britain?

Modern scholarship, secondary source documents in this research project, addressed the experiences of Muslim women either as those similar to that of Muslim men or as only existing in a discussion of the veil. This assessment of course does not involve a discussion of Islamic Feminism literature as it is out of the constraints of this project and paper. This limitation within modern scholarship shows great insight in Islamic culture and society. One must remember that religion is separate from culture which in turn is separate from ethnicity. The culture of the Islamic Diaspora is patriarchal in nature; this is not constrained to the Muslim population as Western societies are patriarchal in nature as well. By having literature that focuses, for majority, on the experiences of Muslim men as the experiences of Muslim men and women, I am able to determine there a limitation in the literature because of the nature of Islamic culture.

Conclusions Based on Analysis of the Literature

This project has show important flows in British society and Western societies at large. The absence of Muslim women from the public eyes shows “their lack of importance”. This

A second conclusion drawn from this research is the threat to Western lifestyle that Muslim women and the veil are said to present. This conclusion is important because it shows that in the minds of Western societies Muslim women = veiled women. This presents a problem as not all Muslim women veil themselves and those who do chose to veil themselves do so for varying reasons and those who do veil wear the veil to varying degrees.

The final conclusion form this research project has shown that there is a major gap in sources about Muslim women that does not touch on the subject of the veil. I do not seek to lessen the importance attached to the veil in the eyes of Muslims; I however seek to understand this population from different angles and points of views which is very necessary for a better understanding of the Islamic Diaspora.

Recommendations for Future Research

At the conclusion of this research, I would recommend future research in the growing field of Islamic Feminism and its impact on Middle Eastern and Western societies. This research would be of great importance to our modern society because it would study the type(s) of feminism, the impacts and implications of feminism on an historical patriarchal society. Another recommendation for future research would be an exploration of Muslim women who do not wear the veil in contrast to those who do. This research would be important because it would allow for an understanding of the veil and the many reasons Muslim women chose to veil themselves or chose to refrain from the wearing of the veil—both in Western and Muslim societies.

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