

Women living under muslim laws  
النساء في ظل قوانين المسلمين  
Femmes sous lois musulmanes

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**Muslim Women and the Politics of Ethnicity  
and Culture in Northern England**

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Women are the hidden factor in the politics of ethnicity in the Muslim communities of Northern England. The broader context to the apparent silence of women lies in a matrix of patriarchy and imperial experience, as well as the impact of Orientalism on contemporary European culture. In other words, there is a culturally embedded assumption that women should know their place, colonial peoples should know their place, and oriental women are too ethereal to have a place at all. The regional context of Northern social conservatism has also had its impact upon how women in all communities, including Muslim communities, are constructed. Last but not least, the particular ways in which a male community 'leadership' has sought to ossify culture and ethnicity have suppressed and denied women's difference, making invisibility a safe but ambivalent position for South Asian women. These different - but mutually reinforcing - stereotypes of women render the problem of Muslim women conspicuous, even whilst their presence is hidden.

In this article I want to examine the factors which have thrown such a shadow across the experience of women from South Asian communities in the North of England, and have so distorted the dynamic of community development in general. That women are largely invisible needs little argument. The spotlight thrown on to Muslim communities in the North of England by The Satanic Verses affair illuminated a few female faces, and women's voices were little sought by cultural commentators eager to understand what they saw as an anti-Enlightenment spasm in the Pennines. Women, it was variously assumed on several sides, were either passive supporters or victims of the mullahs.

The truth is more complex, and its origins lie as much in what minority communities experienced after coming to Britain as in the particular features of the 'cultures' they are alleged to inhabit. Uprooting and crossing continents to start life again has an impact, and continuing reverberations, upon groups as well as individuals. As communities have experienced the trauma of their creation in the process of migration, so forms of politics have developed within them which have looked - inevitably, considering their marginalisation - for more powerful allies or patrons (real or imagined) in the country of origin, or in Britain, or in both. I want to examine the ways in which two different - at some levels antagonistic but ultimately complementary - forms of politics have had an impact upon women in Muslim communities. One of these forms of politics is multiculturalism; the other is ethnicism. An apparent 'third way', anti-racism, will be considered briefly because of the role it played, inadvertently, in facilitating the triumph of ethnicism. Finally, I will suggest that a real alternative, arising out of resistance to the conservatism of community, is, in however fragile a way, beginning to emerge, particularly through the experience and struggles of women. In order to explore these possibilities, however, the communities must be looked at in historical and political context.

**The Impact of Multiculturalism**

Multiculturalism grew from the state's response to growing New Commonwealth communities in

Britain in the 1960s. It is based on an assumption - not always explicit - that minorities can be given limited autonomy over internal 'community' affairs, such as religious observance, dress, food, and other supposedly 'non-political' matters, including the social control of women, without their presence offering any major challenge to the basic framework of social, economic and political relations in society. Multiculturalism has provided the ideological justification of - and coherence for - a range of policies designed to contain communities and isolate them from - or mediate their limited entry to - the local political arena. It has also had the purpose, as far as governments of both the Labour and Conservative parties have been concerned, of depoliticizing 'race' as an unpredictable populist factor in British politics.

Whilst it has clearly been less successful in the latter mission to subdue popular racism, multiculturalism has had astonishing success in the former task of viewing local communities primarily as targets of social policy, rather than as actors in the democratic system. Multiculturalism has also taken on a certain life of its own as it has become rooted as the dominant ideology of 'race' in a range of key professions, notably education and the social services, perhaps because of the ease with which it can be incorporated into existing assumptions about the proper functioning of the welfare state. Multiculturalism has been able to endure since the 1960s, when it was named (perhaps one should say 'christened') by Roy Jenkins as Home Secretary in the context of the first Race Relations Act (1965), the Local Government Act (1966), and the consolidation of highly restrictive immigration controls, because in its slippery pragmatism it typifies British political bipartisanship on questions of 'race'.

Pragmatism, of course, is the preferred British term for a policy lacking any defensible basis in principle. In the 1960s the Home Office had looked at the kinds of policies then being developed by the Johnson administration in response to the demands of the Black Civil Rights Movement in the United States of America. The Civil Rights approach (itself not unproblematic in relation to questions of class) was rejected as unsuitable in British circumstances. Multiculturalism was preferred because it draws much less upon assumptions about citizenship in a democratic state than upon the experience of colonial administration in the age of decolonisation. The multiculturalist state could, for example, liaise directly with an unelected community leadership rather than face the uncertainties of democratic coalition-building.

Multiculturalism's impact upon communities has been one of delimiting and delineating the extent of autonomy to be exercised by an elite self-elected or confirmed by patronage, in exchange for a more general social and political quiescence. In other words, through multiculturalism the state sought to find a means whereby the 'integration' of South Asian communities could be achieved by constructing a stratum of mediators who could represent the community to the state (usually the local state), and interpret the state to the community, without recourse to the ballot box or the slower processes of political socialisation which accountability would have required.

From the beginning, women were not wholly excluded from the ranks of appointed community representatives; early membership lists of 'race relations' bodies reveal the presence of women's names. However, because of the pattern of mass migration - in which men came to Britain alone, to be joined much later by women and children - few working-class women would have been in Britain in the 1960s and so eligible for such co-option, even had it been likely. Thus, as with many routine duties associated with noblesse oblige, it was not unusual for the wives of doctors and academics in the 'migrant aristocracy' to be the ones who made early contributions to the policy of 'race relations' by community leadership. Recognising their role as 'interpreters' of their own working class to white authority, such women could collude in stereotyping working-class women, whilst retaining - the exception proving the rule - their own relative autonomy. It is now difficult to find documentary evidence to illustrate this process as it occurred in the 1960s and 1970s, but I certainly winced through meetings in Lancashire in the 1980s in which middle-class women misrepresented working-class women to white audiences eager to feed upon stereotypes.

Such an inherent class bias in the initial construction of the community leadership also points to an ethnic bias, in that the urban educated middle class from the subcontinent did not necessarily share the same ethnic profile as the mass of working-class migrants they were called upon to represent. At the very least there was often an urban/ rural divide between the middle class and

the working class of the same national origin, sometimes exacerbated by linguistic differences. The subsequent growth of communities in the 1970s in particular did lead to the emergence of what might be seen as more authentic or organic community leaders, often with a commercial rather than a professional background of achievement. This shift to a petty-bourgeois leadership was clearly not in itself unproblematic (some of the problems will be explored below), but in any case the legacy of the earlier 'leaders' remained evident in traces in community politics, particularly where three factors obtained: where the professional middle class were marginalised within their professions (this was particularly true in the medical profession); where they shared ethnic or religious affiliations with the local working-class communities; and where the local political culture was inherently conservative, even if not in a party political sense.

These three factors are found in many non-metropolitan areas in the North of England, particularly parts of West Yorkshire and East Lancashire. Socially conservative, pious, and lacking in glamour or significant career opportunity in some of the professions, majority and minority communities have mutually reinforced their latent hostility towards further change or upheaval. The particular social matrix obtaining in parts of Northern England had other effects in the context of the rise of multiculturalism - effects of particular significance for women.

For the present, it is sufficient to say that the greater diversity of social and political contests and conflicts in large cities makes even conservatism a conscious political choice. Where that is the case, conservatism becomes a position with which it is legitimate to engage in argument because it is self-evidently not monolithic within the community. Relative isolation from diverse social and political currents renders such engagements nearly impossible in the non-metropolitan regions; there, conservatism is the dominant force. This point is important, because the forms that an alternative politics must take in such a conservative environment are different from 'mainstream' or overt opposition, and must be camouflaged in ways that appear to deny any political content or intent. This is particularly true in relation to oppositional stances taken by women, who are subject to a more limited political arena, as well as a greater degree of social censure, in comparison with their male peers in these communities.

### **Northern Conservatism**

It is worth illustrating the operation of Northern conservatism. Its unattractive features - insularity, parochialism, and an apparent obsession with the social control of women and girls - can be contrasted with the more positive benefits of community cohesion in the face of racism and external hostility. This can help to explain the strong ties that bind women - of their own volition, in large part - to communities which in other ways frustrate their aspirations. It is also important in this context to contrast metropolitan media images of Northern communities with the more complex reality.

The North of small-town East Lancashire and West Yorkshire is in many respects materially poorer than other regions of Britain which experienced substantial settlement of minorities from the Indian subcontinent. The industries into which people were recruited, such as textiles, were already in decline in the period when primary immigration was taking place. There is evidence that the settlement of women and children occurred more slowly in the North than in other areas of Britain, principally the West Midlands and London (Vaughan, 1988, p. 9), so rendering the process of creating genuine communities (in gender and age structure) much slower. Apart from the migrants from the New Commonwealth, such regions had, for some time, experienced net population outflow, so depriving them of the political, social and cultural fertility associated with the continuous movements of people characteristic of cities. Such an environment, its difficulties exacerbated by the economic recessions of the 1970s and 1980s, was inherently socially conservative.

Migrants, in response to the shock of their audacity in moving across the globe, can become defensive when the promise of their move is not fulfilled in reality. When such migrants face real, material difficulties, the tendency towards conservatism is understandably reinforced. When the communities into which they have come are also — sometimes for similar reasons — rather defensive, suspicious and conservative, the environment for progressive rather than defensive

radicalism is poor. Thus the construction of Northern Muslim communities as a strange 'Other' — an 'enemy' within — is part reflective of an endemic lack of knowledge or understanding shown by politicians, the media, and other (particularly metropolitan) 'opinion-formers' about the white working class in 'closed communities'.

The point can be illustrated by looking at the comparative treatment of the 1984-5 coal dispute and The Satanic Verses affair. Coverage of both events in the media traded upon stereotypes of wrong-headed but cohesive and single-minded communities. Yet stereotypes of the white working class are more ambivalent than those of working people of minority ethnic origin. Romanticised or heroic evocations of white labour have an echo in British political culture - and not solely on the Left - so that stereotypes can have a positive as well as a negative emotional charge. The result at the time of the coal dispute was to leave some space open for sympathy and political contestation of a subtle kind, as in Lord Stockton's tribute, as a former Conservative Prime Minister, to miners as the 'best kind of Britons'. Such understanding and respect did not attend the characterisation of Bradford's 'book-burning barbarians', because this was an 'unknown' country.

So the obvious connections have never been made between the characteristics of the white Northern working class and South Asian working-class communities who live in such close geographical proximity. The social conservatism of both groups, and some of the social roots of their intermittent disaffection, are in many respects a regional British factor. To lose sight of that whilst evoking the spectre of 'religious fundamentalism' is to misunderstand and to misrepresent the dynamic of Northern Muslim communities.

There is, then, a North/South divide affecting South Asian experience in England which has been obscured by most media explanations of The Satanic Verses affair. A Harris Research Centre public opinion poll conducted among South Asians in Britain for the BBC television programme 'East' in May 1990 demonstrated this clearly. With the exception of answers to questions about the Satanic Verses issue, the most significant division to emerge from the national picture given by the poll was not between Muslims and other religious groups but between Lancashire, Yorkshire and the East Midlands, and the large South Asian communities of the West Midlands, London and the South. On a whole range of social questions - but significantly not on political affiliation - the North was more conservative than the South. That this closely mirrors social and political attitudes in Britain generally is certainly worthy of wider recognition. Northern English Muslim communities are as they are in part because of their specifically English regional qualities, not their 'alienness'.

The politics of multiculturalism, therefore, did at one level successfully mediate the assimilation of South Asian communities into British political culture, as the existence of a North/South divide illustrates. However, the form it took was a parallel path which institutionalised marginalization - a very British form of marginalization, and one with particular implications for women.

### **Community: Cohesion or Division?**

Multiculturalism has cast New Commonwealth Muslim and other South Asian communities as ahistorical in character, despite the long and painful intertwining of all our histories over three hundred years and more. Where social divisions and antagonisms are readily acknowledged as existing in the dominant culture, particularly class and gender divisions, the dynamic of change is denied recognition in Muslim communities in Britain. The minority ethnic community, the multiculturalist perspective, is constructed as static and two-dimensional, like and exquisite Indian miniature compared to the heroic conquest of perspective in dynamic European art. These communities, it is held, lack real politics, because there are no pressing social divisions to require negotiation and the exercise of political skills. In this view, all families are extended, children respect their elders, religious faith is total and unquestioning, and women are veiled creatures living in the shadows. Male community leaders are called upon by multiculturalism to mediate between this community and the authorities, like local elites under a colonial administration. Each side, leader or governor, trades with the other at the margins, anticipating occasional gains but mostly content to recognise their relative power and the boundaries of jurisdiction in each sealed

system.

This is a caricature, of course, but it bears a remarkable resemblance to the assumptions really made by the multiculturalist state. 'Ethnic groups' (note that in the language of social policy only darker-skinned people have ethnicity) are presumed to aspire to permanent marginality by their continuing desire to speak the languages of the Indian subcontinent - sometimes known, strangely, as 'community languages' - and by their stubborn attachment to a rigidly hierarchical (but classless) social system. The local state, in particular, reflects ruefully from time to time upon the inherent contradiction between their 'equal opportunities for women' policies and the need to 'respect' minority community autonomy, but this glimmer of awareness of a problem rarely follows from a questioning of their assumptions about the nature of the 'community' itself.

These assumptions are permitted to survive because for the state it is easier to deal with something unchanging represented by authoritative figures who can be co-opted at the margins into existing structures. For the beneficiaries of such patronage the result can be to strengthen their hegemony within the community; the 'friends in high places' syndrome can operate in many cultural guises. Subcontinental systems of patronage and obligation have been able to fuse with British traditions of representation without democratic accountability because those in positions of relative power have found it convenient or rewarding, or both. 'Ethnic absolutism' was thus created and reinforced (see Gilroy, 1987, for a discussion of ethnic absolutism).

The new organic community leadership of shopkeepers and small-business owners was particularly likely to support the ethnicist position, as they had an objective material interest in maintaining the cohesiveness and introspection of the community. Their rise to lower-middle-class status was dependent upon the 'ethnic' and cultural needs of the community, because their shops and businesses supplied the services which white commerce had little interest in providing. The 'ethnic' grocers, clothing stores and specialist or multilingual services, from travel agencies to garages, did not merely serve the community, however; they also offered a highly visible expression of the community's identity and self-confidence.

The same also applies to the later development of community-based professional services, for example medical and legal practices, although their development was also symptomatic of the effects of racism in the professions, whereby doctors and lawyers (etc.) were effectively ghettoised, or compelled to seek to practise in a more sympathetic environment.

Genuine needs on both sides, therefore, meant that ethnic entrepreneurship was effectively promoted by the informal trade barriers of ethnic difference. This is by no means a phenomenon unique to South Asians in Britain. Marginalized or excluded communities have often generated their class or other social differences through a similar process, as any look at the history of African-Americans, or other non-European ethnic groups in the USA, will demonstrate.

In many cities successful entrepreneurs, usually fortuitously, came to develop new markets beyond the community - either by cultivating a growing multi-ethnic group (like many food stores) or by attracting trade from beyond the locality through specialisation. By thus weakening the economic ties that bind the middle class to the community, this has given the impetus in many areas to the middle-class move to the suburbs, in the classic migrant manner. Where such a move happens, it stretches notions of community, and will ultimately weaken the ties of allegiance. In non-metropolitan areas these changes have been happening to a much smaller degree. Where a weaker small-business sector depends more upon the community for its livelihood, the pressure for maintaining a static and conformist notion of community can build up. The threat of 'assimilation' is not only seen to challenge cultural norms, but has material consequences for the fragile emergent middle class. Survival, as well as sentiment, can compel 'community leaders' to seek to preserve or even invent 'the community' to meet their own interests. Diversity is 'bad for business'.

The results of this process of 'sticking together' can be slightly bizarre. Walking through inner Preston recently, I saw a middle-class Muslim family strolling through the narrow cobbled streets, with one of the children riding her pony! There, English suburban middle-class aspirations met

terraced-street proletarian stoicism in a way that only migrant experience could synthesise! The serious point is that social processes - including class formation, and the dynamic of gender - when stunted by economic circumstances and the limits that racism places upon social mobility, will produce some strange consequences. One of these consequences is the imposition of a caricature of a particular form of patriarchal society upon still emergent communities.

This caricature is of the social structure of the region of origin. Inevitably, it is a poor fit when it is cloaked over a new and developing community in another continent. 'Settled' patriarchies have the appearance of being settled precisely because they include the spaces women have won for themselves, and because many forms of gender conflict become institutionalised and familiar. In Pakistan, India and Bangladesh, rural women have clear responsibilities and a physical terrain which is theirs to control. Conflict or difference can be countenanced without necessarily having to shake the foundations of social existence. Inverted and invented 'traditionalism' as imposed upon Muslim communities in Britain is not relaxed or self-confident enough to encompass or sanction any significant degree of conflict, precisely because it is felt that it would shake the security of the community.

The picture being painted here is one of the reality of marginalization. Communities still sufficiently new to be insecure have been going through the process of social consolidation in a climate of economic recession and continuing racial hostility, particularly in the North of England. Outside pressures - whether through allure or insistence - have found Northern England a difficult terrain in which to become established. It should not be surprising that Muslim communities have also demonstrated resistance to political and cultural challenges in this environment.

That there are interests involved in the promotion and defence of static notions of community, or ethnic absolutism, should be expected. So too, should be the small but growing development of fissures under the surface of the community as its inherent contradictions - the very dynamic of community - are made manifest.

### **Women, Islam and Ethnicism**

Islam provides a fascinating example of how ethnicity, community and gender can collide in strange and unexpected ways. The maintenance of a static notion of community requires an ideology, particularly in the face of a dominant culture which may appear at times to offer more rewards than continued and total allegiance to the community. Islam can provide the intellectual strength and cohesion to that ideology - ethnicism. The existing order in the community is sanctioned both by the way things are said to be done in an ever more mythologized version of the homeland, and by reference to the teaching of Islam. This may be of particular importance for the experience of women, as Islam, like other religions, can provide 'evidence' drawn from the social mores of the time of its historical origins to support particularly oppressive social practices. Islamic law as practised in some (but not all) Islamic states makes the point eloquently.

Islam, however, did not become a world religion by barbarism. For many, particularly those from peasant backgrounds who came to Britain to become working-class, the idea of engaging with interpretations of Islam as an intellectual exercise was as unfamiliar an idea as theological dispute might be to a Catholic peasant in the Minho. But the process of defending community cohesion by an appeal to the value and superior moral distinction of Islam has been capable of evoking a different response from younger people educated in the traditions of Western scepticism. Taught to question by their education, they have questioned both their religion and their community, but not in ways that might be expected by Western liberals. For some young people Islam, when looked at critically, has appeared to offer a liberation from their parent's narrow conception of ethnic identity in a manner which does not reject the more positive attractions of community. Where ethnic absolutism offers a restricted vision, the global appeal of intellectual Islam offers the possibility of a wider world in which to live. Where an appeal to the 'traditional' or closed community offers the unattractive posture of defensiveness and fear of contamination by Western wickedness, Islam can appear to offer wider opportunities through its capacity to offer inoculation against materialism and sin.

Put simply, an intellectual understanding of Islam, as opposed to simple obedience to a theocracy, must question some of the basic assumptions made by the 'ethnic' community. Questions like choice of marriage partner, or access to education and employment, are answered in divergent ways by narrow ethnicism and broader Islam. Where the conservative community may want to pull a girl from secondary school at the age of fourteen (as happens regrettably often in parts of Northern England), the good Muslim girl who shows unusual devotion to her faith may find it possible to express a desire for higher education or professional employment without risking her position or that of her family.

The Muslim Manifesto produced by the 'fundamentalist' Muslim Institute argues the case explicitly:

Muslim women in Britain are in a unique position to develop a comprehensive life-style all on their own in which they can develop their talents and achieve their ambitions to the full always guided by Islam. (The Muslim Institute, 1990, p. 8)

A secular feminist might see this as self-deluding or inherently contradictory, and indeed, to some extent such criticism is valid; but it must be acknowledged that rebellion by bright young women may take many forms. The ties that bind to one's family and community are strong, and any means of reconciling personal ambitions with emollient relations with family and friends may be attractive. In the case of an appeal to Islam to legitimise educational or social aspirations, the means to a form of personal liberation — albeit qualified — may arise naturally, organically, from one's experience of a community in which strong (and possibly increasing) emphasis is laid upon religion as a stabilising force in an unstable world.

None of this is to say that the contradiction is thus resolved. Marrying another Muslim, being educated as a Muslim, working as a Muslim: none of these things need be intrinsically stabilising for the family or community if one's marriage partner is from the same religious group but not from one's own ethnic group, or if the marriage was arranged in too loose a manner, or if one gains 'too much' (particularly economic) independence as a woman through education or employment. In this way Islam is at least a potentially subversive force in the conservative communities of the North of England.

Declaring that a community is 'Muslim' — as opposed to Sylheti or Punjabi, for example — can be a guide to some of the fractures that will emerge as the dynamic of the community creaks into gear. Men may have strong material and political, as well as 'moral' reasons for hoping that Islam will work as a break upon women's independence. Women may find that they can subvert men's intentions by taking male rhetoric about religion, as in The Muslim Manifesto, at face value.

It is impossible to say quite how many younger women in the North of England have chosen an Islamist route out of ethnic absolutism. An impression of numbers may be possible, as there is an element of 'youth culture' about political Islamism which manifests itself in dress. 'Ethnic colour' in dress, and the wearing of make-up, appear to be rejected in favour of a more sombre style in which covering one's hair is more important than hiding the shape of one's legs. The inspiration seems to be contemporary Middle Eastern rather than 'traditional' Indian subcontinental Muslim. It is a student's or a professional office worker's look rather than the dominant style, but as such it is none the less remarkably common.

To describe this kind of Islamist subversion on women's part is not to be wholly sanguine about its benign implications. The fact that political Islamism has some appeal in the North of England is symptomatic of the relative success of ethnicism with a Muslim core in maintaining rigid and religiously legitimated forms of patriarchy in the community. Tensions that must arise out of the experience of any community, let alone one that is still experiencing the shock waves of migration, have to take some form. Religion can be a powerful polarising force against the attractions of secular materialism in imposing the direction from which dissidence can be expressed. Equally, however, the medium — religion — can become the message.

### **The Failure of Anti-Racism**

It is also the case that the persistence of multiculturalism, ethnicism and Islamism underlines the failure of anti-racism in the 1980s. Anti-racism at its clearest asserted the unity of the 'black' people in Britain because of an objective common interest in fighting racism. At the municipal level, anti-racism was a potentially powerful force for facilitating the development of more democratic and accountable political relations between black communities and white authority, as well as encouraging a more democratic political culture to emerge in minority communities themselves. At a basic level, politics is about the distribution of resources, and the resources which the anti-racist local state could offer were not insignificant, even in the face of growing hostility from central government. There was an attempt, in some cases, to be explicit about making a linkage between different facets of anti-discrimination: in other words, to avoid the trap of thinking 'all blacks are male, all women are white.'

The promise of anti-racism — to offer minority communities a democratic route out of marginalisation — was, unfortunately, rarely made explicit enough to be resilient in the face of the hostile political circumstances of the 1980s. Too often anti-racism was not distinguished from — or was mistakenly held to be compatible with — multiculturalism. The proper recognition of a need for black minority autonomy in the development of political strategies and organisation too easily became an excuse for not recognising or engaging with sexism in black organizations. Black women were under strong pressure to be black (or 'authentically ethnic') first, women second, in accepting the primacy of the anti-racist struggle. The white Left was — in some ways rightly — pushed to recognise its racism and leave well alone. In this context of walking on political eggshells, exacerbated by the central government assault upon Labour local government from the mid 1980s on, anti-racism dwindled into a better-resourced form of multiculturalism operating the usual system of patronage.

The débâcle of anti-racism was not merely an interlude in the forward march of multiculturalism. Its influence was real, if limited. The style and rhetoric of anti-racism, stripped of its political content, was plundered by both the state and minority communities, and found a path into the cultural mainstream — perhaps illustrating its potential strengths, had national political circumstances been more favourable. Attempts at creating a visual representation of the multiracial community were central to the practice of anti-racism in its heyday — for example, by paying attention to municipal public-relations and publicity material. This use of 'positive' multiracial images has now become standard practice in some government departments, and has been developed further, and in more complex ways, by the advertising industry. From Community Charge leaflets to privatisation share issues, there is now some visual recognition of Britain's multiracial character. This is, in a small way, a token of success for anti-racism.

But the legacy of anti-racism for minority communities, particularly for community leaderships, has not been a depoliticized veneer of inclusion in the image of the national community, but a conscious taking up of anti-racist militancy for ethnicist ends. Anti-racism accelerated the development and practice of some of the skills of political activism, from lobbying to community mobilisation, as well as exposing some of the weaknesses of Left-liberal sensitivity towards minorities. As the agitation against The Satanic Verses shows, the 'ethnic activist' has in many respects capitalised upon this heritage, much to the bewilderment and confusion of the white Left.

The new style of activism, stripped of the input (however feebly it was once manifested) of socialist and feminist politics, is often aggressive and macho, both in rhetoric and in action. Socialists and feminists from within communities are cast as unmilitant gradualists out of touch with the realities of community life or contaminated by alien influences. In this way the 'traditionalism' of the old or lower middle class can be conjoined with the quasi-ethnic nationalism of male youth. There can be no place for women in this kind of politics, yet its lineage is authentically radical.

### **Fundamentalism**

At no point in this analysis of the political influences upon Northern English Muslim communities has it been suggested that genuine Islamic fundamentalism is in itself the key influence. Understood properly in its global context, Islamic fundamentalism has an intellectual rigour and

praxis which are largely absent from the experience of Muslim working-class communities in Britain, as Tariq Modood (1990) has argued persuasively. Rather, as Akbar Ahmed has suggested (Guardian, 'Jeans for You, Robes for Me'), when a justification for some practice or belief rooted in 'ethnic' tradition is demanded, there is a knee-jerk appeal to Islam as a means of avoiding having to face the question. In Britain, in the context of developments in international politics which have erected Islam in the place once occupied by Soviet Communism, some activists are only too happy to be associated with the glamour of a powerful international force, and the association, however tenuous, makes good copy for the press.

The dangers inherent in this noisily intransigent pose, full of sound and fury and signifying nothing, are well illustrated by an examination of the domestic angle on media news coverage of the 1990 war in the Gulf. From the moment of the invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 reporters began a descent upon the mosques of England, and particularly of Bradford, the capital city of the 'enemy within'. The effects of spuriously associating British South Asian Muslims with a war about oil in the Middle East, particularly one promoted so jingoistically by sections of the popular press, served only to entrench the marginalization of Muslim communities and to fan the flames of popular racism. Yet the relentlessness of media attention (in Preston, not noted as a media city, my colleagues and I were fielding several journalistic enquiries a day about the local community's position at the start of the war) encouraged people unsophisticated in the ways of the media to agree to blood-curdling propositions, and then to become trapped in defence of an ill-considered and politically dangerous position, as happened also during The Satanic Verses affair. This has then, all too often, been presented as the view of the whole community. It is no such thing. It is not the view of a homogenous community, nor is it Islamic fundamentalism.

This takes us back to the position stated at the beginning of this article. There is a symbiotic relationship between the state and the dominant culture in Britain, and sections of the leadership and activists in South Asian Muslim communities, which has had damaging effects for the development of the community as a whole, and particularly for women. Its consequence has been a collusion between (unequal) partners to maintain a narrow and static definition of community which severely circumscribes the stage upon which women are permitted to perform as political and social actors. Multiculturalism has provided a mandate for the community 'leadership'. Ethnicism has provided them with an ideology. Islamism has done more, by subverting both multiculturalism and ethnicism. It has done this by conflicting with the former, and shifting the ground from beneath the latter. Women who wish to use their ingenuity can find some space in which to operate in all three of these political arenas, but there are limits — particularly upon working-class women — to how far it is to wise to assert an alternative position, or to take independent and autonomous action.

### **Women and Dissent**

Many women reach the limits of 'legitimate' dissent, particularly if their battles are not fought over issues where some resolution or compromise is possible without loss of face for the men involved. Where the argument is over education or employment, for example, compromises which mean some acceptance of the community's 'right' to maintain surveillance over their women at work or at study may be struck. Young men in colleges often form an informal intelligence network with a hotline to 'opinion-formers' in the community: reporting, for example, on unapproved relationships, attendance at social events, or even style of dress and 'immodest' behaviour. To reject, rather than accept, the community right to police personal life and choices is to take a much more difficult and exposed step.

Subversive — or, more often, submerged — acts of defiance nevertheless do continue to occur daily in the lives of Muslim women in Northern England. Even in the tightest, most vigilant of communities, women make love, or their own form of war, practise 'illicit' contraception in a variety of relationships, make unlikely friends, have abortions. At the same time the men proclaim — usually, I believe, sincerely — that such things cannot happen in Muslim communities, their own hypocrisies (and the women who share them) conveniently forgotten! But for a woman to choose openly to live as an outlaw in the midst of her own community, repudiating male jurisdiction over the limits of what is communally tolerable, remains so uncomfortable — dangerous, even — that few women in the non-metropolitan North of England are in the position to withstand the pressure

to conform. Even quite small degrees of nonconformity may be sufficient to provoke massive pressure — some of it from women themselves, who see the reaction generated by their sisters' defiance as a threat to their own limited freedoms. Domestic violence, even, may be tolerated because the prospect of rejection — not by one man, but by one's whole social world — is felt to be too catastrophic to contemplate. The invisible ties that bind women to the community are very strong, but they are not necessarily accepted without criticism or struggle. To be critical and to struggle, however, is to accept pain.

Ultimately, such happiness cannot continue to be submerged. As the claims that there is a static community identity are revealed to be a fiction, so the male leadership's ability to impose their chosen methods of social control over women and girls must be increasingly contested. Real battles are being fought and won. The argument presented here is that such contests have their roots in the material world, and can take many forms. Islam, as a basis for one of those forms, has been appropriated by some on both sides in the contest because it is seen — in present, defensive circumstances — as conferring an incontestable legitimacy upon two essentially contradictory struggles. It would be a mistake to dismiss out of hand the significance of Islamist 'feminism' in British Muslim communities. It is simply one — currently visible, albeit highly unsatisfactory — route to a limited extension of opportunity for a relatively small number of women.

In the longer term, however, the prospects of a continuing high profile for religion among the socially mobile are not good. For the Northern English Muslim intelligentsia, the limits of Islam as a key to the opportunities of a largely secular society must soon become apparent. It is likely that as that happens, the mode of expression of identity through religion must be modified, and may eventually become little more than a residue, at least as a basis for activism or political mobilisation. The language of Islam is, in the present context, addressed to a contest within the community. Social mobility puts a greater focus upon relations with more powerful exterior forces — relations which see legitimacy symbolised in other, more secular ways. The growth of the new Muslim middle class in Britain will continue to undermine Islamism (as opposed to the simple expression of religious faith as an aspect of ethnic identity) by providing other outlets for the expression of class interests.

The real contest will then be revealed as a more fundamental struggle than the one currently expressed, in part, through Islamism. The coming contest will be a battle not against community — as, necessarily, some forms of Islamism have been — but for community. The community that many women, through their struggles to control their own bodies and determine their own lives, want to create will recognisably have emerged from the communities of today. The insecurities of migrant experience generate ambivalent effects. The reverse side of insularity and defensiveness could be solidarity and warmth in circumstances where women's experiences can be freely expressed and legitimated. Social and moral censure against a wife who rejects her husband could in other circumstances, become intolerable of a husband who abuses his family. Rigidity can relax, and surveillance can become concern and supportiveness. These opposites are intrinsic to community, but need a balance in order to be asserted in proper measure. Women are currently the missing balance in the Muslim communities of Northern England.

How long will it take for women's experience to find open expression in the Muslim communities of Britain is difficult to estimate. The forces which resulted in the epithet 'Muslim' being attached to in some ways disparate South Asian communities will retain their resilience as long as a particular and politically intense antipathy towards Islam remains a part of majority political discourse in Britain. There is a clear message, therefore: anti-Muslim 'racism' is bad for women. The unhappy prospect which follows is that in the political climate of the early 1990s it is not easy to see when Muslim communities will feel less insecure and vulnerable.

On the other hand, the social and political processes that can bring about change can be identified and, once understood, should be regarded as an imperative for action. To act requires, in the first instance, an active rejection of the multiculturalist state. The assumption that the same small group of men can always speak for the community in negotiations about the distribution of resources, such as Section 11 funds, must be challenged. Attempts at limiting the choices available to women and girls with regard to social services need to be countered by demands for

## **WLUML Dossier 20 July 1998**

women to be actively involved in the delivery and structuring of those services. The institutions of the local state, in particular, need to be reminded, forcefully, that not all women citizens are white, and that no community's needs are homogenous and unchanging.

The more difficult and more crucial area for action lies in the interventions in the politics of community itself. Here there is a role for classic pressure politics by women who are able to put their heads above the parapet and draw the flak, but in the short term at least such action will remain a hazardous minority prospect in the communities of Northern England. Those of us within and outside the communities need to concentrate on the informal networks through which women operate in order organically to build up support for effective challenges to the hegemony of the community leadership. The solidarity of women over the politics of the personal sphere needs to be encouraged to emerge from the secret walls of friendship, and to take on the campaigning role.

These things must be done in order to reinvigorate the secular and progressive traditions within South Asian Muslim communities, so long suppressed by multiculturalism and ethnic absolutism. Only in this way can the oppressive practices developed by some communities be challenged with any prospect of success.

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