

Sabine Schmidt

Beyond the Veil

Culture, Religion, Language and Identity
in Black British Muslimah Literature

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1. Introduction

There's this view that the Islamic world is violent, oppressed and anti-democracy and all the other stereotypes. And then there's a view within the Muslim community – and we have to be honest about this – that says, 'The west is bad.' But I'm British Muslim; I'm a Muslim and I'm from the west. (Shelina Zahra Janmohamed, qtd. in Barton)

British Muslims make up about 4.4 per cent of the population of Great Britain. Many of the 2.78¹ million Muslims are of Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Sudanese or Indian origin, while some of the UK Muslims are also white British (see Appendices A1 and A2). The Muslims in Britain thus have various backgrounds, various cultural roots and traditions. Yet time and again they are referred to and addressed as *the* Muslims in Britain.

As the initial quote by author Shelina Zahra Janmohamed emphasises, many Muslims in Britain practice an Islam that has been altered by the migratory experience and that has indeed been influenced by their status as British citizens. Especially with the second generation of immigrants, it is not the Islam that has been brought to Britain from somewhere else, as described by Jocelyne Cesari in the following:

Through their maintenance of family and regional ties, Muslims have traditionally reconstituted within the West their local religious communities of origin. As a natural consequence, immigrants from the same region, sometimes even the same village established the first generation of Western mosques. This localization of Islamic communities has had two consequences. First, it has preserved cultural practices and protected against assimilation into the surrounding environment. Second, it has sustained a division of the Muslim population along lines of those national cultures within which Islam is embedded. Even within neighbourhoods, where a single mosque might have served their needs based on religious practice alone, Muslims have preferred to establish multiple mosques on the basis of ethnicity – whether North African, Turkish, or Pakistani. (Cesari 84)

While there are certainly some characters, such as Mrs. Islam in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, who represent the Muslims Cesari is speaking of, the Muslim protagonists described in the texts are part of a hybrid Islam. Muslims from various different countries and regions of the world meet in their chosen host country in the West to practice their religion, which is the element that binds them. This is where Homi Bhabha's Third Space as a concept can be called upon. Of course, this hybrid Islam requires a common language because it consists of members of

¹ Sum of the figures of Muslims in England, Wales and Scotland in 2011. There is no data for Muslims in Ireland in 2011; however, previous data from 2001 stated that there were about 2,000 Muslims in Northern Ireland (Marranci 223).

various different countries and cultures and of second or third generations of immigrants who tend to speak better English than any other language. English is therefore the necessary means of communication and is, by the way, “the second language of Muslims all over the *umma*” (Cesari 86, *emphasis in the original*). In 2004, when Jocelyne Cesari published her article “Islam in the West: Modernity and Globalization Revisited”, this new Islam was a relatively young phenomenon.

The emergence of a “new Muslim” minority, whose membership is rapidly growing, has been an unexpected consequence of Muslim settlements in the West. Its novelty resides in its separation of religion from ethnicity. New Muslims have anchored their identity primarily within the transnational concept of *umma* (the timeless community of believers) rather than in national culture. Their solidarity with their “brothers” abroad was demonstrated by their protests against *The Satanic Verses*, their opposition to the Gulf War, and their support for peacekeeping efforts in Bosnia and Kosovo. (Cesari 85, *emphasis in the original*)

The emergence of these new Muslims is mirrored in the texts in this study. Although Monica Ali has faced much criticism for her “biased” portrayal of the Bangladeshi population in *Brick Lane* (see Hiddleston 57), her novel demonstrates how this new Islam and hybrid formations of Muslims can come into being. Leila Aboulela’s and Janmohamed’s novels as well as the teenage fiction all embody this new Muslim community. In turn, every kind of fundamentalism is being portrayed as unsuccessful, outdated or hopelessly ridiculous, as can be seen by the portraits of Mrs. Islam (*Brick Lane*) or Amal’s uncle and aunt (*Does My Head Look Big In This?*).

New Muslims exercise new levels of individual choice in the course of religious observance. Their encounter with democracy has fundamentally altered their relationship as individuals to Islamic tradition. They experience religion first and foremost as a matter of spirituality and personal ethics. In the Muslim world, where Islam is a part of the dominant social norms as well as the religion of both state and majority, the group – not the individual – serves as the vehicle for Islamic identification. New Muslims have not only adjusted to postmodernity, urbanity, and globalization, they have also adapted to a “culture of separateness,” one that presupposes autonomy and independence even in the religious realm (Gretty 2000). Consequently, identities that are integrated in Muslim countries are automatically deconstructed into religious, social, and ethnic components in the West. (Cesari 85-86)

The protagonists of the texts act according to Cesari’s theory. They form an identity which comprises their mixed cultural heritage and their individual interpretation of their faith. They feel that they belong to the global ummah, at the same time, they are conditioned by their status as British (US or Australian) citi-

zen. Their identities are thus composed of various, even sometimes antagonistic elements which have to be brought into balance.

Public debates about Muslims in Britain have ensued following, for example, the discussion of Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* (1988), the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001, the London bombings in 2005 and, only recently, the attacks and the wars of the Islamic State (IS). After the publication of the 2011 census data, many newspapers highlighted the fact that 5 per cent of all people living in England and Wales are Muslim (see A1). In light of these figures, some of the commentators feared the "Islamic future of Britain" (Cooper). The political and social debates about Muslims in Britain mostly revolve around the question of whether or not the lifestyles of the Christian Occident and the Muslim Orient can be reconciled. Another topic often discussed is the status and the situation of Muslim women in the Western World (Gilliat-Ray 206). Many literary productions about Islam and Muslim women have been concerned with their oppression and/or the way in which Muslimahs were able to break through and free themselves from it (see Barton).

British literature about Muslims can be subdivided into three groups. The first group covers writers such as Salman Rushdie and Hanif Kureishi, who criticise Islam and Muslim fundamentalism.

Muslim writers have used the Qur'an in the past for political and social critiques; some, like Taslima Nasrin, Hanif Kureishi, and Salman Rushdie, have pushed the subversive trend a step or two further by questioning the authenticity of the Qur'an itself. (Mustafa, "Defending the Faith" 282)

In their texts, Islam is often described as an obtrusive factor in the integration process, a barrier that needs to be overcome in order to be able to fully belong to the West.

In the 1990s and the 2000s, this first group of writers was joined by a second one. For most of them, Islam was related to fundamentalism. Other authors, such as Farhana Sheikh in her novel *The Red Box*, described Islam as an issue to be dealt with during the process of integration. Claire Chambers mentions some of the representatives of this second group in her article "Recent Literary Representations of British Muslims". Her concise analysis deserves quoting at length:

In terms of literary representations, from the mid-1990s to the 2000s, such writers as Hanif Kureishi (*The Black Album*), Zadie Smith (*White Teeth*), Martin Amis (*The Second Plane*), Ian McEwan (*Saturday*), Sebastian Faulks (*A Week in December*) and John Updike (*Terrorist*) have used Islam rather reductively, typically as a marker of fundamentalism, Islamism or the stereotypical figure of the terrorist. Other, less high-profile novelists, such as Farhana Sheikh (*The Red Box*) and M.Y. Alam (*Annie Potts is Dead*), have portrayed groups of young Muslims grappling with issues surrounding identity in late twentieth-century Britain, often showing

characters choosing to move away from their Muslim cultural and religious heritage towards a secular, individualized existence. For these writers, while Islam was an important concern, it remained subservient to other issues, such as gender, class, sexuality and regional identities. (Chambers, “Recent Literary” 175)

It is thus not surprising that Barbara Korte and Claudia Sternberg only mention Muslim adolescents in black British literature with regard to fundamentalism in their 1997 introduction to the collection of black British short stories called *Many Voices – Many Cultures* (29). Back then, Islam was predominantly portrayed as an outdated concept in the Western world, restraining the freedom of its followers.

From the beginning of the new millennium onwards, however, there has been a third group of predominantly female writers who make Islam a central part of their narratives and who stress its importance for their Muslim protagonists. With their texts, the authors object to past findings, particularly from the 1970s and 1980s, which foresaw a decrease of the importance of religion (Baumann 4). The protagonists’ faith and the *Qur’ān* instead become a “positive power” in the novels, and “a refuge from an environment that has suddenly become less hospitable” (Mustafa, “Defending the Faith” 282). What is more, Islam even functions as the necessary background from which they can then unfold themselves (Baumann 13). The authors thus differ from the previous groups of writers: In their novels, Islam becomes the source of empowerment and inspiration – a vital element of their protagonists’ identity, helping them to integrate into society.

Literature Review

In literary studies, Muslim British authors are put into the category of “black British authors”. Increasingly black British literature has been a focus of studies from the beginning of the new millennium, in Britain as well as in Germany. Roy Sommer’s *Fictions of Migration: Ein Beitrag zur Theorie und Gattungstypologie des zeitgenössischen interkulturellen Romans in Großbritannien* (2001) provides an overview of the four dominant categories of what he terms fictions of migrations. Sommer analyses novels of migration, the black British Bildungsroman, historic and hybrid novels of migration and suggests that a redefinition of Englishness and Britishness in favour of cultural diversity has to be considered (Sommer, *Fictions of Migration* 197). After Sommer’s seminal work, many publications followed. Susanne Reichl’s *Cultures in the Contact Zone: Ethnic Semiosis in Black British Literature* (2002), for instance, is an analysis of more than thirty black British novels. She particularly studies the so-called contact zones in which various cultures and languages meet.