

**The Development of a Br-Islamic Identity:
Third Generation Bangladeshis from East London
(Tower Hamlets)**

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Declaration of Authenticity

I, Aminul Hoque, declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own work.

Signature:

Date:

Abstract

This thesis is an in-depth ethnographic study of the lives and multiple identities of six third generation British born Bangladeshis from Tower Hamlets. I argue that they find it difficult to be both British and Bangladeshi and are presented with difficult identity choices. Marginalised by mainstream British society due to ethno-cultural differences, many are also excluded from the Bangladeshi community due to their adoption of a seemingly more Western lifestyle. This complex situation brings into sharp focus the question of identity or identities. Are British born third generation Bangladeshis:

- Bangladeshi ?
- British ?
- Muslim ?
- A fusion of the three ?

The central argument of this study is that this dual exclusion from both wider British society and Bangladeshi culture has forced many third generation Bangladeshis to seek alternative identities.

In modern geo-politics, the emergence of Islam as a powerful mobilising entity for its followers, has led to the growth of religiously orientated identities in many younger generations across the Muslim diaspora. Numerous third generation Bangladeshis from Tower Hamlets have syncretised their Bangladeshi culture with their Western socialisation within an Islamic framework. The result is the construction of what I have termed a *Br-Islamic* identity. Enabling the subjects to identify comfortably with their multifaceted identities, *Br-Islam* challenges traditional Bangladeshi norms, values and rituals and also contests the complex notion of what it means to be ‘British’. *Br-Islam* allows many to be British, Bangladeshi and Muslim all at the same time, thus occupying more of a socio-political rather than theological space in wider society.

Furthermore, as a dynamic and complex postmodern identity, Br-Islam requires a constantly changing view of ‘self’, responding to rapid social, economic and technological changes in modern society. I argue that *Br-Islam* is a fluid response to this crisis – a hybrid concept negotiating the complexities of modern society and providing its members with the voice, visibility, belonging, representation and confidence to partake in the wider political process.

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Part One

Introduction

The Purpose of the Study

“my aim is general and modest: to create a better understanding of the problem by highlighting the historical perspective and providing some previously unknown information and fresh insight. If at the end of [this study] the reader feels that [s]he is able to see the wood instead of the tree, the purpose of [this study] will have been amply served” (Hiro, 1971: vii-viii)

This study aims to explore the multifaceted identities of six third generation Bangladeshi's from East London (Tower Hamlets). Having been involved in grass-roots voluntary community work with Bangladeshi young people from the East End of London aged between 7 and 25 for over eighteen years, it has become apparent to me that there is a constant state of confusion over their identities. Many find it difficult to be both British and Bangladeshi, whilst some feel that they do not belong to either of the groups. I argue that many have constructed a Br-Islamic identity for themselves to help negotiate the complexities of ethnic, racial, national and linguistic identity groups that they are a part of. This 'new Islam' is a strong modern public identity and represents both a critique of Western society and also of a 'backwards' traditional Bangladeshi culture (Kibria, 2006; Basit, 1997). It is important to note that Br-Islam is still a relatively new form of identity and is still in its formative years. Furthermore, not all third generation Bangladeshis from Tower Hamlets are active participants of Br-Islam.

My MSc dissertation examined the complex notions and meanings of 'home' and the politics of national identity for a group of ten first generation Bangladeshi settlers in Britain (Hoque, 2003b). This convinced me that there was scope for a more detailed and lengthy study which looks into the experiences of the third generation and to examine whether their experiences have followed similar patterns. Many third generation Bangladeshis do not view Bangladesh

as their “*desh*” (home). Instead, they identify first with their immediate local geographical territory (for example Tower Hamlets or East London), and then secondly with their nationality (for example, Britain). This is very different from the majority of their grandparents and parents who still view their “*desh*” as Bangladesh and have aspirations of returning back ‘home’ one day (Hoque, 2005).

Furthermore, through the adoption of the English language, through different eating habits and dress codes, through the ridiculing of culturally symbolic events such as weekend extended family get-togethers and arranged marriages, and through the emergence of a more technologically orientated generation, it is argued that a major cultural, ideological and linguistic gap is emerging between the different generations. Whilst the emergence of this gap is interesting in itself, the focus of this study will concentrate more on the lives and identities of the British born third generation Bangladeshis from Tower Hamlets.

There have been many anthropological and sociological studies conducted on the East London Bangladeshi community in recent years (Eade, 1998; Gardner, 1995, 2002). **However, as yet, there is no phenomenological ethnographic study of the Bangladeshi ‘third generation’ from East London.**

Much of the literature written on the British Bangladeshi community has focused its attention on issues such as poverty, crime, housing, arranged marriages and education and has predominantly examined the first and second generation of settlers (Tomlinson & Hutchinson, 1991; Phillips, 1988; Eade et al, 1996). **What makes this study innovative is that it tackles complex notions of identity and its relationship to language, religion, the concept of multiculturalism, gender, ethnicity and race and frames it within the context**

of self narratives from the third generation. Furthermore, my research comes from the perspective of someone who himself has been affected by many of the complex issues discussed in this study and who himself is actually part of the research process itself.

An examination of both secondary and primary sources so far have led me to formulate the following research questions:

- What does the experience of third generation Bangladeshis tell us about British multiculturalism ?
- Is language a vital component of identity construction ?
- Is birthplace a vital component of identity construction ?
- Can you be born in Britain and still engage in discourse which refers to the ‘motherland’ outside of the British Isles ?
- Is skin colour a major barrier to societal participation ? How does racism help form alternative identities ?
- What is the relationship between ethnic and national identity ? Are both necessary in the construction of identity ? Can you be Bengali (ethnic) and be British (national) at the same time ?
- What is the role of religion (Islam) in this whole debate ?
- Is there a specific Bangladeshi female identity ?

My aims in conducting this research are:

- To use the subjective experiences of local third generation Bangladeshis to determine a way forward in making Britain a more ‘inclusive’ society;
- To assist teachers and other interested parties in Britain in understanding the important role that religion and home culture plays in children’s education;
- To assist teachers to understand the complex notion of identity and how identity (or the lack of it) can present itself both as a major barrier to learning and also can open up innovative avenues for new learning experiences;
- To help people understand the complex nature of ethnicity and how it feels to be a minority growing up in urban Europe;
- To help overcome the endemic concern of ‘cultural ignorance’ by exposing the subjective feelings of Bangladeshis to wider society;
- To help government policy makers and academics to understand minority culture and introduce a range of policies which will help accommodate different religious minority groups in Britain.

Structure of Thesis

There are four interrelated schools of conceptual thinking that underpin the findings of this study:

- The concept of the ‘other’ was central in the stories of the six participants (Akbar, Azad, Saeed, Sanjida, Taiba and Zeyba). The “*non-Muslim*”, “*the white man*”, “*Bangladesh*”, “*British culture*”, amongst many other examples, represented notions of ‘otherness’ to the participants of this study. Equally, negative and racialised representation of the immigrant and Muslim ‘other’ has also revived notions of ‘in’ and ‘out’ group status (Hagendorn, 1993; Said, 1979). The practice of ‘othering’, therefore, is a complex two way process. Hall (1996) and others (Foucault, 1980; Butler, 1990) argue that it is only through the relation to the ‘other’, the representable, the symbolic, the relation to what it is not, that identity is constructed;
- The six participants of this study were engaged in a continuous process of negotiating their identities of being a British born Bangladeshi Muslim. The emergence of Br-Islam, it is argued, is a dynamic post modern identity which provides a space for them to manage their complex and often conflicting identities;
- Due to the disconnect from a “*backwards*” (Azad) Bangladeshi and an ‘exclusive’ British culture, the participants of this study find a sense of belonging and identity with the global Muslim population. The ‘imagined community’ (Anderson, 1983), therefore, is an important theoretical concept to consider when examining the identities of British born Bangladeshis;
- The findings of this study must be located within the politics of “*recognition*” (Taylor, 1992). Becoming a British Muslim, or exerting it as an important part of your identity, I argue, should be viewed as an “*equality seeking movement*” for the participants of this study (Modood, 2005: x). Public space is essentially created through on-going discursive contestation and political struggles for “*recognition*” from differing groups, especially those groups experiencing multiple levels of deprivation, disadvantage and discrimination and are thus engaged in a struggle for social and economic justice, visibility and representation.

These above concepts emerge continuously throughout the whole study in my attempt to understand and analyse the many complex components of third generation Bangladeshi identity.

The main argument of this study is that a Br-Islamic identity has developed for many third generation Bangladeshis from East London in the year 2010 which enables them to fuse the many components of their multifaceted identities together.

In order to expand the argument above, this thesis is divided into four parts. **Part One** serves as an introduction to the overall thesis. Within Part One:

- Chapter one is a reflexive autobiographical chapter outlining my own personal and academic reasons for the study;
- Chapter two of this thesis provides necessary background, history and context to the whole study. In particular, this chapter outlines a complex socio-political history of Islam in Britain and also examines the local Bangladeshi community in Tower Hamlets;
- Chapter three is a critical analysis of my chosen methodology behind the research - an ethnographic narrative approach. This approach puts the focus on the researched and allows for their voices and personal stories to be heard. This chapter examines the complexities involved in using a narrative approach during the research process and also examines why I have preferred it to other research methods;
- Chapter four is both a literature review and a pilot study. It examines some of the research questions posed above by interviewing three third generation Bangladeshis from East London as part of a pilot study and locates their voices within some of the wider literature and theory concerning issues of identity, race, religion and multiculturalism.

Part two:

- Introduces the six participants of the main study;
- presents the data from the interviews which are colour coded and categorised into themes and then coded into sub-themes (for the purposes of analysis);
- outlines the many facets of their identities; and
- examines the reoccurring themes that connect the participants.

Part three of this thesis analyses the data that emerges from the main body of field research with the six participants of this study. The data (voices, experiences, feelings, stories, opinions) from the six participants are interwoven within the key themes and literature and are analysed in the following chapters:

- Chapter six examines the relationship between the ‘Bengali’ language and the ‘Bangladeshi’ culture. This chapter also examines the powerful role of the English language as a language of modernity and also of an emerging Arabic linguistic identity as part of an overall Br-Islamic culture;
- Chapter seven argues that the “*problem of the colour line*” (Du Bois, 1989[1903]) and the related actions of racism and discrimination remain real issues in the year 2010 for many of the participants of this study. Experiences of racism still governs their daily social lives, locates many within a social and political position of inferiority and thus directs their identities;
- Chapter eight of this thesis pushes forward the main argument of this study – the development of a Br-Islamic identity. This chapter is both a theoretical analysis of the importance and growth of religion in the modern world and also provides much empirical evidence illustrating the existence and various components of a vibrant Br-Islam;
- Chapter nine analyses the question of a British national identity. It locates Br-Islam within British multiculturalism and argues that space should be afforded for publicly assertive religious identities in secular Britain. I argue that Br-Islam is not at odds

with the concept of 'Britishness', rather it is simply a "*different kind of British*" (Ward, 2004: 138);

- Chapter ten considers the development of a specific Bangladeshi female identity within Br-Islam. The central argument of this chapter is that there is an unequal gender space which has developed in Br-Islam which does not afford the same rights and liberties to its female members. There remains some tension between progressive Br-Islam and traditional conservative Bangladeshi Muslim patriarchy.

Part four outlines the overall conclusion of this study. My main argument is that Islam, in its many guises (spiritual, social, radical, practical, nominal, ideological, politicised, cultural, 'foreclosed', 'diffuse' or 'exploratory' (Sahin, 2005)), provides a sense of belonging and acceptance to many third generation Bangladeshis against years of racism, poverty and marginalisation. I argue that membership to a fluid and dynamic Islamic identity provides the desire for "*recognition, visibility, acknowledgement, association*" and "*protection*" that West (1995: 15-16) refers to in his discussion of identity. Islam also provides a safety net against a Bangladeshi culture and 'way of life' which is increasingly becoming alien and irrelevant to the everyday lives of many British born third generation Bangladeshis from East London.

Furthermore, the conclusion also sketches out a six point social programme for policy makers, Bangladeshi parents, community leaders and professionals working with Bangladeshi youth as a 'way forward' in their ongoing struggle for "*recognition*" (Taylor, 1992; Mandair, 2005: 23), voice, equality, belonging, power and visibility in wider British society.

As a 'starting point' to this study, Chapter One provides an autobiographical account of the many incidents and events which have led me to formulate the research questions highlighted above. No research or action happens without a reason or a purpose. The first chapter of this

study outlines these reasons within its own timeframe and context. Furthermore, self-narrative and memory are important in our understanding of self and the construction of identity (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000; Randall, 1995). The identity question is a complex and highly subjective one therefore it is important to tackle the question of my own identity before I attempt to un-riddle the identity of others.

Chapter 1

My Starting Point

I'll never forget the walk from the Hotel Golden Inn to the Cinema Palace Bus Station in Chittagong. It was the summer of 2004 and my family and I were running late for our one o'clock bus to Cox's Bazaar. This was meant to be a relaxing road trip. It was meant to be a trip of self-discovery, a trip of ancestral investigation, a trip which was to give meaning to our culture, explain to us *why we are the way we are* ? It certainly was not relaxing but it definitely gave me some insight into many of the research questions posed in the preceding pages of this thesis.

My younger brother and sister, Shohidul and Lipa, found it a far more profound experience than me. They were not actually born in Bangladesh, although they had spent nearly two years living there when they were very young. This did not form a barrier in *their* connection with the people, the culture, the language and the environment. Although the lifestyle they were used to in London was a million miles apart from the poverty stricken streets of Chittagong, both Shohidul and Lipa felt a sense of connection unparalleled in London.

".....*This could easily have been me*", suggested Shohidul pointing to the rickshaw peddler. He said no more and I did not need to probe any further. I knew what he meant.

My parents could not believe that such a trip was happening. Their children, two of whom were born in London and the rest brought up there, were willing to engage in a road trip in the country where they were born and raised and where so many of their memories were grounded. Despite being used to a completely different environment, their children could not

forget their motherland, their heritage and their culture. They had accomplished what most Bangladeshi parents living in London dream of – living the Western dream (education, career prospects, house, car, status) yet never forgetting the motherland.

The five minute walk to the bus station seemed like an eternity. Whilst I was quietly observing the environment and listening to the dialogue involving Asia (my wife), Lipa and Shohidul, my thought process was involved in something else altogether. It was another day of strike (*hartal*) and many of the workers had taken to the streets in a peaceful demonstration to improve their working conditions. Blasting through the public megaphones were the words of the forefather of Bangladeshi nationalism President Zia. His cries of “*joy Bangla*”, rallying and uniting the Bengali nation against West Pakistan in 1970, was indeed having an effect not only on the many thousands of people on the streets but also on me. Here I was with my British education, money in my pocket, guide book in hand, combat trousers and expensive trainers. On the face of it, there was a vast difference between myself, my cousins who were accompanying us on the trip and all the demonstrators on the streets. Yet, a wave of nostalgia, the chilling words of Shohidul, and a sense of deep connection hit me. I too became nationalistic and patriotic. Nationalistic and patriotic like I was towards the English national football team during my visit to the 2004 European Championships in Portugal. I was British then, but at that moment in Chittagong, I was also proud to be a Bangladeshi.

I was entering a thought process where I was distilling the “*dilemmas of negotiating identities*” as I crossed borders “*geographically, politically and psychologically*” (Kearney, 2003: x). My confusion here was illustrating the “*complexity and ambivalence of the process of negotiating identities*” that was unfolding in front of me (Kearney, 2003: x). London may have provided me with better opportunities and I may have looked different to everyone

around me, but I felt comfortable and relaxed – I felt at ‘home’. This was where I fitted in mentally and I was finding my sense of belonging. The world around me, although different to what I was used to, made sense to me. **My complex identity was taking shape.**

Yet the story of why I have decided to examine the relationship between third generation British born Bangladeshis and their identities goes back even further. Whilst the above incident crystallised in my head that this area of investigation merits both academic and personal research, my quest for finding out the answer to the philosophical and complex question of *who am I ?* (Woodward, 2004: 8) has snowballed in importance due to many incidents which have occurred during my lifetime. These incidents have left me seeking the answers to many questions:

- Where is home for me ? East London or Sylhet, Bangladesh ?
- Where do I feel like a foreigner ? East London or Sylhet?
- Where do I get a sense of belonging ?
- Are variables such as language, where I was born, my gender and class background, skin colour and religion important in defining my identity ?
- Who and what am I ? Am I working class because of where I grew up and because my father was a machinist? Am I middle class because I am educated? Am I a Bangladeshi ? Am I English/ British ? Am I a Muslim ? Am I bound by national borders ? Am I patriotic towards England or Bangladesh ?
- Who is the ‘other’ whom I constantly define myself against ?
- Why do I need to define myself ? Why is this investigation taking place now and not before ?
- Why is having a positive and assured sense of identity absolutely necessary for me ?

As I enter the process of self-discovery, I recount the many “*historical processes*” which have “*deposited*” within me “*an infinity of traces*” which have contributed towards defining my own personal identity (Gramsci cited in Kearney, 2003: vii). This is my attempt to

compile an “*inventory*” of the “*historical processes*” which have in part answered the questions posed above but more importantly, raised many other personal, philosophical and academic questions that need further analysis.

I was born in a mud hut in a village called Bagir Ghat which is in the district of Sylhet, northeast Bangladesh. Where I was born means a great deal to me. It is where my roots lie, it is where my ancestors are from. Where I was born is very different to where my childhood memories are. Taking advantage of Britain’s liberal immigration policy, my father came to the United Kingdom in 1963. Working all the hours possible, he migrated from one industrial city to another in the north of England before he settled down in the East End of London. My mother, my older brother, sister and I came to these shores in 1980. I was only two years of age and my immediate childhood memories revolve around black and white photographs of me as a toddler and stories told to me by my parents and other relatives.

My earliest memories are bound up with the concrete football pitch in a housing estate in Bethnal Green, East London which essentially became my second home. This is where my friends and I congregated and where we became *aware* of ourselves as both an ethnically and racially homogenous community. My “*identification*” with fellow Bangladeshis on the premise of common origin, similar physical characteristics, shared history and “*native country sentiment*” was being constructed (Hall, 1996: 2-3; Weber, 1997: 18). All of my immediate friends spoke Bengali, we wore the same clothing from the same market stalls, were bound together by Bengali ethics and rituals and most importantly, we all looked the same.

Even at school, this sense of being *different* was compounded on a daily basis. But what seemed to be the problem? I, I mean, *we were* different. We wore grease on our hair, did not eat pork and spoke English with an accent. We experienced much racism and physical violence from the ‘white boys’ in the school playgrounds, on the local streets and in the concrete football pitches of our council estates. Both communities did not understand each others way of life. Chants of “*smelly*” and “*paki*” were commonplace. We were, however, young children just like anybody else and the differences apart, we also had many similarities. Just like my black and white peers, I too loved playing the game of football and my superheroes were also Superman and Spiderman. I could not understand why I was made to feel different, why I was made to feel like an outsider, somewhat inferior and second-class. I just wanted to fit in and be accepted. If, as Woodward (2004: 7) argues, “*identity is marked by similarity, that is of the people like us, and by difference, of those who are not*”, then my experience of Bethnal Green made a clear racial and cultural distinction between ‘us’ Bangladeshi “*paki’s*” and the ‘white boys’.

Everything changed in 1988. My father always reiterated the following: “*get yourself an education, make something out of your lives*” and “*I neither had the choice nor the opportunities*”. My father lost both of his parents during his teenage years and was forced to cultivate the lands that his father had left him in Sylhet. Although he was devoid of a conventional education, he wanted his children to have an education and also to escape the trouble ridden daily routine of Bethnal Green. He viewed a move out of the council-based estate that we were living in as an absolute necessity for progression in British life.

Years of hard labour and a successful family venture into the catering trade in 1986 allowed my father to purchase a four bedroom house in Forest Gate, Newham in 1988. The four

bedroom house with a garden and access to better schooling was a recognition of my fathers hard work and many sacrifices.

It was in the London Borough of Newham that I was introduced to a more diverse mix of people. My teenage years were very cosmopolitan. Everyone around me was no longer predominantly Bangladeshi. My immediate community and my secondary schooling consisted of people who spoke a variety of different languages: Urdu, Gujarati, Hindi, Bengali, Patois and English. I made friends easily and in a twist of irony, my best friend Richard was actually white himself. The warmth I received from Richard and his family made me realise that the equation of whiteness and racism did not go hand in hand.

By storying my own life like I have done thus far, I am trying to make sense of my own identity (Sarup, 1996: 15-16). There are other incidents in my life that have contributed to my current 'starting point':

- For example, the racism I encountered as one of the few non-whites in the Sussex County League whilst captaining the university football team during 1995 and 1998;
- the feeling of international displacement during my time studying in California (1997) when being dismissed as a 'Mexican'; and
- the many late night conversations with my liberal university friends 'defending' the notion of arranged marriage and the supposed cultural backwardness associated with this.

I want to end this chapter, however, by noting one further incident which has contributed significantly towards this research project. The many incidents discussed thus far have been practical experiences which have left a permanent mental imprint. The discussion below, however, illuminates why I have merged the philosophical enquiry of the *who am I?* question with academic perseverance.

Perhaps the most significant inroad made in my personal development or in my search to the *who am I ?* question has been the relationship that I have developed with my father since breaking my leg in a football related accident in February 2002. Whilst undergoing rehabilitation at home, I encountered, for the very first time a new phenomena – spending time with my father. Amidst moments of uncomfortable silences and boring daytime television, we soon realised that we had a lot in common. This time that we had in abundance soon turned into hours of conversations about important issues such as finance, family, business plans, land purchases in Bangladesh. I felt mature, wanted and important. I had made the breakthrough by default. My father was talking to me.

What also developed was a series of questions and answers between my father and I. Questions and answers about life in Bangladesh or as he calls it “*home*”, about me as a toddler, about my grandfather, about his childhood, about how he met and married my mother and about his immigration experience. His stories filled a void, a gap in my knowledge. We grew closer and I suddenly felt an urge to revisit the motherland. I felt immensely proud that I was a Bangladeshi and I had to return ‘home’ to explore further.

The opportunity to return ‘home’ arose in December 2002 when Sporting Bengal FC invited me to attend their football tour of Bangladesh. I was too young to have absorbed up the atmosphere back in 1992 during my first visit back to Bangladesh. But now I was ready for my Bangladeshi visit. I was ready to delve into the *who am I?* question even further. I felt a special sense of connection and belonging with fellow Bangladeshis and Bangladesh as I met my relatives, visited the physical space of my birth and toured the Eastern part of Bangladesh with my football team. This feeling of ‘belonging’ was stronger than ever before. I finally felt

as if I had found 'home'. I felt wanted, I felt secure. I was not forced to be conscious of my ethnic or racial identity.

My father's story-telling whetted my appetite for further personal and academic enquiry into notions of 'home' and 'identity'. His experience of immigration was the catalyst for my MSc dissertation which examined the experiences of the first generation of Bangladeshi settlers in the UK during the 1950s and 1960s. **This study attempts to tackle many of the issues raised during my masters research and analyse them within a contemporary timeframe. By examining the experiences of the third generation of Bangladeshi settlers in the East End of London, it is hoped that the complex issue of identity can be explored further:**

- How do they view themselves ?
- Are they British or Bangladeshi ?
- Do they experience issues of racism, displacement, alienation ?
- Are they constantly forced to re-examine their own identity by the 'other'?
- Who is the 'other' ?
- Where is 'home' for them ?

Why the third generation ? Again this is driven by personal observation. The experiences of my British born nine nephews and nieces who constitute this third generation add complexity to the many questions already highlighted above. They dress differently, they speak English, they have a different diet, have a separate network of friends, do not regard Bangladesh as the eventual place of return and they ridicule Bangladeshi cultural events such as weddings and weekend get-togethers. There has been a shift. Overtly, they have become more British/Western than their parents and grandparents. The identities of the third generation Bangladeshis from East London is complex and multifaceted. The third generation want to be British yet they are excluded from being so. They want to be Bengali but their actions and

lifestyle have contributed to the development of a generational and cultural gap between them, their parents and their grandparents (the first generation).

This sense of confusion over identity among the third generation was highlighted in a questionnaire of 103 11-16 year old Bangladeshis from Stepney Green School in East London. When asked the question of what category best describes them, 34% used the term '*Bengali-British*', 23% used the term '*British-Bengali*', a further 10% viewed themselves as purely '*Bangladeshi*' and only 6% saw themselves as '*British/ English*'. 68% also considered their Islamic identity as being '*very important*' which suggests that they have overlapping identities. 64% of the respondents thought that they would never be considered British/ English because '*they had a different skin colour*' and a further 18% highlighted a different mother tongue as a barrier to becoming considered British/ English.¹

This sense of confusion within the students from Stepney Green School strikes similar chords with my own experiences. Like me, I have witnessed my nephews and nieces exerting their 'hyphenated' identities (Lahiri, 2006; Zwick, 2002) where the hyphen acts as a symbol of the inner struggles they face in trying to blend in with the norms of their new culture while maintaining the traditions of their ancestors (Bhabha, 1996: 54). It also denotes a sense of simultaneous belonging to multiple homes, nations and communities (Garbin, 2005; Barrett et al, 2006). I have kept in touch with my roots and have found comfort in my Bangladeshi heritage and culture. I argue that this is not the case for the third generation. Many have become a lost generation carving out a completely new identity, a *third space* (Bhabha, 1994: 66-84) or a *creole world* (Hannerz, 1992: 261) for themselves. More importantly, I argue that the search for a new socio-linguistic religious identity is a symbol of resistance from the third

¹ Questionnaires conducted in November 2004. 103 respondents, Stepney Green School, London E1 (conducted by Aminul Hoque with the assistance of the Geography Department)

generation against assumed, imposed and non-negotiable identities which positions them in undesirable and subordinate ways in wider British society.

My quest is very personal and I am hoping to find answers to many complex inner questions through the examination and experiences of the third generation. For I, like Kearney (2003: xi), believe that the best learning only “*occurs when we have a personal desire or a need to know*”. The storying and self-reflection of my life thus far in this chapter is *my starting point*. Yet, I intend to fuse this personal curiosity with academic and intellectual enquiry in an attempt to help the ‘other’ understand the complex nature of identity, especially the identity of people whose roots lie elsewhere.

Before deeper analysis takes place, however, it is important to provide some background information and context about East London and Tower Hamlets, take a closer look into the history of Bangladeshi settlement in East London and also discuss the diversity and socio-political complexity of Islam in Britain. The following chapter (two) will not only contextualise my own personal history as outlined in this chapter, but it will also aid the reader when equating theory with practical reality and provide important socio-political context to the analysis of data and key themes sections in parts two and three of this thesis.

Chapter 2

The history and settlement of Bangladeshi Muslims in Britain

2.0 Introduction

This chapter is an outline of the history and settlement of Bangladeshi Muslim migrants within Britain. It examines firstly the complex ‘macro’ picture of Muslims in Britain and then analyses the ‘micro’ picture of the Bangladeshi community of Tower Hamlets which has a Bangladeshi resident population of 30%.² This chapter is central to my thesis as it details many of the reasons for immigration and also examines many of the issues experienced upon settlement.

This chapter has a dual function. Firstly, it provides the reader with an historical and sociological context to the whole of the thesis, especially the voices, feelings and experiences of the participants of this study. Secondly, this chapter acts as a backdrop to the data analysis section of this study which examine the central roles of language, race, religion, multiculturalism and gender in the question of third generation Bangladeshi identity.

The key themes in this chapter are poverty, educational underachievement and social marginalisation which are prevalent among the Bangladeshi community. Social marginalisation refers to a situation where Bangladeshis have suffered from economic, social and political deprivation over the past fifty years. Political marginalisation refers to a situation whereby Bangladeshis feel powerless as they have no means to influence decision-makers. However, it is argued that whilst Bangladeshis remain marginalised from wider

² www.towerhamlets.gov.uk

mainstream society, at a more ‘micro’ level, through engagement in local area politics (Begum and Eade, 2005), some second and third generation Bangladeshis have become part of the decision making process. The election of Lutfur Rahman as the first ever executive mayor of Tower Hamlets in October 2010 is an example of the political maturity of the Tower Hamlets Bangladeshi community (East End Life, 25-31 October 2010).

It is important to note that out of the 283,000 estimated Bangladeshis living in Britain, 92.5% have identified themselves as Muslims (ONS: 2004). As such, the phrases *Bangladeshi* and *Muslim* have largely become synonymous and are used interchangeably in this chapter and throughout the whole thesis. There are many overlapping issues such as poverty, racism and discrimination which affect both Bangladeshis and Muslims in Britain.

This background chapter is divided into six inter-connected sections:

- The first section outlines the process of South Asian Muslim immigration into Britain;
- The second part of the chapter examines the depth, diversity and many faces of Islam in Britain;
- Part three of this chapter explores some of the socio-political factors which have contributed to the increasing popularity of Islam in Britain, especially among the younger generations;
- The fourth part of the chapter considers many of the national and international factors that have transformed British Muslims from a “*passive*” to a “*troubled*” community (Hai, 2008);

- The fifth section of this chapter focuses more on the local ‘micro’ situation and is a detailed historical examination of the Bangladeshi community of Tower Hamlets;
- The final part of this chapter outlines many of the socio-political issues affecting the Bangladeshi community of Tower Hamlets.

2.1 South Asian Muslim Immigration into Britain

There is evidence of a Muslim presence in Britain as far back as the Tudors and Stuart times (Matar, 1998: 45-49). Although there are many benefits of migration such as higher earnings, better healthcare and education and sending remittances to land of origin (Islam et al, 1987: 28-59; Dahya, 1974: 77-118; Gardner & Shukur, 1994; Bermant, 1975; Mahmmod, 1991; Massey, 1997), I argue that it has been and continues to be difficult to be a Muslim in Britain³. In recent times, there have been cases of threats, fatal attacks, as well as persistent low level assaults such as spitting and name calling aimed towards Muslims (BBC News, July 2005; BBC News, November 2006). Furthermore, a recent British Social Attitudes Survey (2010) found that the general British public are concerned at the rise of Islam in the UK with many people suggesting that Islam poses a threat to the British national identity. The survey also found that 55 per cent of the respondents would be “*bothered*” by the construction of a large mosque in their community (Wynn-Jones, 2010).

³ Although it is noted that the vast majority of the wider British population have nothing against the British Muslim population, the recent English Defence League campaign against Muslims in Britain and the pan European Stop Islamisation of Europe movement are just two illustrations of some anti-Muslim hostility which is growing in prominence amongst certain sections of the British and European populace (refer to www.englishdefenceleague.org/ & <http://sioe.wordpress.com/>). The British media and certain politicians have also been criticized for propagating negative stereotypes of Muslims and fuelling anti-Muslim prejudice (Richardson, 2004; Dood, 2010)

Like many other immigrant communities, South Asian Muslim migrants have left families and familiarity behind in order to carve a new life for themselves in Britain. This new life has often involved much transition, pain and upheaval (Hoffman, 1991). In addition, Geaves (2005: 66-67) notes that British Muslims have had to address and negotiate their citizenship within a 'new' world with its emphasis on democracy, secularism, individual rights and pluralism and "*have needed to discover how to participate in a society which has no need for Islam in its public life*". Furthermore, in his anthropological analysis Lyon (2005: 78) also asks how you can promote notions of cultural blending and 'melting' between Islam and White Europe as there are "*fundamental differences*" in values between post-Enlightenment Europe and revivalist Islamist populations around the world.

The broadcaster Jon Snow (quoted in Lewis, 2007: x, 8-9) reminds us that the majority of Bangladeshi and Pakistani Muslim immigrants are a "*rural community in urban life and are still adjusting to the demands of urbanisation*". As former subjects of Britain's colonial past, many South Asian Muslims in Britain have also been forced to negotiate their citizenship, social status and identities within the context of the racist, orientalist and suspicious "*gaze*" which reinforces essentialist, simplified and stereotypical perspectives of each other (Geaves, 2005: 67; O'Donnell, 1999; Said, 1979). It is this gaze which has been one of the key determinants contributing to the existence of a bi-polar, insular, ignorant and isolationist Muslim and non-Muslim British world.

The majority of British South Asian Muslims have settled in post-industrial cities such as Bradford, Manchester, Glasgow, Birmingham and East London since mass immigration in the 1960s. Currently, London has the highest proportion of British Muslims (607, 000) (ONS: 2004). Post-war Britain needed labour to rebuild the economic infrastructure and many

immigrants from the Commonwealth nations (West Indies, East Africa, Indian sub-continent) came over to work in certain industrial sectors which were no longer attractive to the existing workforce (Jones, 1978: 515-533). The twenty year period from 1940 witnessed a visibly multi-racial and poly-ethnic society which had a profound and irreversible effect on the whole “*character*” of the British social order (Ballard, 1994: 1). British residents now were physically noted as being of non-European origin and the indigenous British predominantly urban population was overtly exposed to new diverse cultural, religious and linguistic traditions and customs imported by the multitude of immigrant communities (O’Donnell, 1999).

Many of these immigrant workers settled in neighbourhoods which had a large white working class indigenous population. Whilst overt racial hostilities towards these immigrant communities is discussed in greater detail in chapter seven, a brief discussion of ‘host’ (Tinker, 1977: ix) reaction is necessary as it explains the process of segregation amongst the Muslim immigrant communities upon arrival which is important in the debate of being young, British, Bangladeshi and Muslim in the year 2010. As Kershen (1998: 18-19) notes, “*superficial, or surface, physical differences provide the most immediate and obvious means of ‘identification with’ or ‘difference from’ [other people in society]... [leading to the] processing of group separation*”.

Settlement in British society was far from easy for the primary Bangladeshi Muslim migrants of the 1950s and 60s and arguably, they encountered many of the problems that other migrants into urban cities around the world experienced, such as poor housing, low paid jobs and second class citizenship (Tinker, 1977: 20-50). In an account of a range of White-British reaction to the growth of minority presence in Britain over a hundred year period, Holmes

(1988: 275-317) argues that minority presence in Britain, especially in domains of employment and ethnic and religious expression, has given rise to intense hostility from the White/ European hosts of Britain as it has deemed to present a challenge to the White status quo. This hostility according to Marxists such as Miliband (1987) was a desperate attempt by the established white working classes to improve their bargaining power in the competitive climate of a capitalist economy.

In addition to competing for scarce local resources which was one of the key factors behind the northern riots in 2001 (Lewis, 2007: 29), non-European settlers have also found themselves subjected to racial “*marginality*” (Westwood, 1995: 197-221) contributing to a sense of separateness. Skin colour, therefore, remains an “*inescapable social marker*” for many of the migrant settlers (Ballard, 1994: 2-3). Accordingly, the majority of South Asians have engaged in what Robinson (1986: 32, 67-98) has termed a form of “*social encapsulation*” away from a discriminative host society (refer also to Hiro, 1971: 110; Tinker, 1977: 5).

Although there was much racialised tension, Abbas (2005: 9) argues that limited acceptance of immigrants by the white working class indigenous communities was based on the belief that South Asian Muslim and other ethnic minorities would eventually return back to their land of origin once their employment period had completed. In fact, many ‘primary’ settlers themselves also believed that they would return back to the motherland as the main aim of migration was to earn a substantial amount of money very quickly and send the money back to Bangladesh for investment in land and property (Gardner & Shukur, 1994: 142-147):

“I came to Britain in May 1963 with a work mentality. I wanted to earn as much as possible and return back home. As such, I saw my stay in Britain as temporary (Haji Maram Ali quoted in Hoque, 2005: 18)

However, Anwar (1979) argues that the idea of ‘return’ to the homeland remained a “*myth*” for many South Asian Muslims as many men settled into the harsh economic, social and housing conditions of urban British life, forming and forging segregated communities. Kershen (2000) argues that demands for remittances and the inability to save as much capital as they would need to settle down to a comfortable life in Bangladesh meant that the temporary migrants soon became permanent settlers. The cost of ‘return migration’, whilst ideologically appealing, was too complex and financially risky (Gmelch, 1980: 135-159). Therefore, whilst the ideal was one of ‘return’ for many of the first generation migrants, the economic reality was one of immediate leading onto permanent settlement in Britain (Grillo, 2001: 13).

2.2 The depth and diversity of Islam in Britain

The religion of Islam, whether in its spiritual, cultural or political guise continues to play a very important role in shaping the identities of the third generation Bangladeshis from Tower Hamlets in East London. This section provides a historical survey of the evolution of Islam in Britain and also analyses key socio-political events involving Muslim communities that has brought Islam and its followers into sharp public, political and media scrutiny over the past twenty years.

There is often the misconception that Islam is a monolith. That there is the existence of a singular British Muslim community as opposed to plural divided communities. This view is problematic and I argue that it is more appropriate to talk about ‘identities’ rather than

‘identity’. British Islam is a complex mosaic of people divided alongside class, sect, clan, caste, ideology, levels of religiosity and ethno-national lines (Lewis, 2007: 22-23; Peach, 2005: 29; Garbin, 2005; Modood, 2010). Whilst an “*imagined identity*” links global Muslims together in a de-territorialised world (Roy, 2004: 18-19; Anderson, 1983), the practical reality is one where a domestic or a global umma (one Muslim community) does not exist.

According to the Office for National Statistics, the Census of 2001, where religion was included as a category for the very first time, there are currently 1.6 million Muslims in the United Kingdom of which around 1 million are from South Asia. Peach (2005: 18) suggests that it has probably grown to this number from an initial count of around 21,000 in 1951. Furthermore, due to the large youth population of the British Muslim community⁴, it is expected that the population figure for Muslims in Britain is likely to double to 3 million by 2021 (Lewis, 2007: 20). This figure of 1.6 million places Islam as the second largest organised religion in Britain, after Christianity, with a population of 2.7 percent (ONS: 2004).

Two thirds of the current South Asian Muslim population in Britain originate from Pakistan and under a third are from Bangladesh with the remainder from India. Muslims from North Africa, Middle East, Eastern Europe and South East Asia make up the remaining 0.6 million population (Peach, 2005: 18-25) whose characteristics, history and socio-economic backgrounds are very different to the predominant Pakistani and Bangladeshi Muslims (Halliday, 1992). Peach (2005: 25) notes that due to the numerical advantage of South Asian Muslims in Britain, there is a danger in essentialising Islam and arguing that South Asian characteristics are fully representative of Islam itself. There is also an increasing number of converts to Islam estimated to be around 10-20,000 per year (BMMS, 2000; also refer to

⁴ Muslims have the youngest age structure of all religious communities. Around 33% are aged between 0-15 compared to the national average of 20%, Lewis (2007: 19-20)

Hoque, 2006; Modood et al, 1994: 70) which will make a significant impact on the demographics of the British Muslim population in the Census 2011. Internationally, the global Muslim population is currently estimated to be at 1.57 billion accounting for nearly a quarter of the total global population.⁵

There remains the existence of a minority of deeply conservative British Muslims who still hold an oppositional and isolationist position against British society such as the Tabligh-I Jamaat, the Salaffis or Deobandis (Geaves, 2005: 67). There are also other groups such as the Hizb ut-Tahrir propagating the establishment of an Islamic state (khilafah) (Akhtar, 2005: 164-176). There are also countless other fringe organisations which have been caught up in the global rhetoric of terror against the Muslim umma (community) and propagate violence against the infidel (non-believer). There is not the time, context or space to discuss the growth and impact of radical Islam in Britain in this study. This area of research has been covered by numerous journalists, writers and academics (McRoy, 2006; Husain, 2007). This thesis focuses more on the life stories and identities of the third generation Bangladeshis from Tower Hamlets who are governed by questions of social and economic justice than a preoccupation with violent revolutions and an alternative Islamic state.

The diversity and complexity of the British Muslim community is best illustrated using Sahin's (2005) typology of Muslims in Britain (foreclosed, diffused and exploratory). Sahin's study of the attitudes of 400 16-20 year old Muslims in three Birmingham sixth form colleges found that three attitudes emerged in regards to personal religiosity.

⁵ <http://pewforum.org>, 2009

Firstly, there was the emergence of the ‘foreclosed Muslim’. These devout, conservative Muslims were those with a religious commitment not informed by personal exploration and who viewed Islam in an ahistoric way, presupposing that shariah (Islamic law) is unchanging and eternal applicable for all times, contexts and places. Islam was the only way for this group of Muslims. From this perspective, it is seen as a perfect system of governance and law and should not be expected to adapt to changing situations. Instead, situations must adapt to Islam. For this group of Muslims, there was no such thing as ‘modernising’ Islam. Lewis (2007: 44) notes that the respondents of Sahin’s study who identified themselves as foreclosed represented an “*unbridgeable gap*” between themselves and the rest of society. They viewed themselves as living in a land of non-believers who were morally decadent and contact with whom was to be avoided. They were in but not part of multicultural Britain. The beliefs of the foreclosed Muslims, it must be highlighted, were in the minority of the sample size.

Secondly, there were a group of Muslims which Sahin categorised as ‘diffuse’. This group showed little evident interest in religion. They believed in the basic teachings of Islam but did not participate in Islamic practice. They lack personal commitment but want to preserve Islam as a cultural element in their lives, an identity marker that enabled them to resist assimilation into what they called ‘white culture’. They remain committed to the idea of Islam without subscribing to all of its norms. Islam for this group of Muslims, according to Siddiqui (2004: 57), is a private matter which is dictated by personal experience, interpretation and ‘picking’ and ‘choosing’.

Finally, there was the emergence of what Sahin called ‘exploratory’ Muslims, those searching to make sense of religion. This represented the majority view whose followers unlike their

tradition bound culturally enclaved parents, sought to make sense of Islam as a living entity relevant to their everyday lives inside and outside of the home. There was a strong emphasis on being *British* Muslims. Sahin notes that those who were foreclosed tended to be male, while most of the females were in the exploratory category, in part a response to the greater control to which they were exposed to at home and within their communities.

As we will see later on, it can be argued that most of the six respondents from my study fall into Sahin's typology of either being 'diffuse' or 'exploratory' as there are some who are just Islamic by culture and use it to make a identity distinction between themselves and the 'white' 'other' and there are others who are more Islamically orientated and are trying to make sense of what it means to be a British Muslim. None of the respondents were in the foreclosed category which does not mean that this voice does not exist in Tower Hamlets. Sahin's typology reinforces the argument that British Muslims are not only divided along ethnic factors but there are also ideological demarcations.

2.3 The increasing popularity of British Islam

Having established that Islam in Britain is complex and diverse, this section of the chapter examines some of the socio-political factors which have contributed to the popularity of Islam in Britain, especially among the younger generations.

There has been a shift in the religious practice levels of British Muslims over the past twenty years. At a time where evidence points to a general decline in the practice, affiliation, belonging and attendance level of believers of other world religions such as Christianity (Voas & Crockett, 2005), Muslims in the 1990s and 2000 have become more aware and conscious of their Muslim identities. This is a fact reflected locally in Tower Hamlets where

nearly seven thousand worshippers attend the London Muslim Centre on the 27th night of Ramadan on an annual basis of whom thirty percent are under the age of twenty five (Khan, 2008). Storry and Childs (2002: 251) note that the percentage of the UK Muslim population who claimed to practise Islam had risen from twenty to fifty percent between the 1980s and mid 1990s. Previous attitudes towards Islam were more strongly governed by ethno-historical roots as opposed to an Islamic identity (Mandaville, 2001:111).

The expression of an explicit Muslim identity in a non-Muslim or Western context is occurring. The French academic Olivier Roy has termed this process the “*re-Islamization*” of European Muslims where Islam has become an integral part of the average Muslim’s personal identity (2004: 23). This visible “*religiosity*” (Akhtar, 2005: 164) has been more evident among the younger generations of British Muslims many of whom are religiously more devout and assertive of the Muslim faith than their parents. For example, numerous polls suggest that the younger generation aged between 16-24 are religiously more conservative than their parents. In a report entitled Living Apart Together, the conservative think tank Policy Exchange found that 86% of young Muslims believe that Islam is important in their lives (Mirza et al, 2007). Furthermore, a workshop involving 103 British young Muslims organised by the *Guardian* in 2004 found that 80% of the group prayed at least one time per day and 50% prayed five times per day. This level of religious practice, argues the *Guardian* columnist Madeline Bunting, is “*higher than any other community in the UK*” (2004: 17).

It is argued that as a consequence of the public and media reaction to recent domestic and global events such as 9/11 and 7/7, the majority of British Muslims in the year 2010 have developed a ‘victim’ mentality (Hoque, 2004c, 2004d; Marranchi, 2005). Sarup (1994) and

others (Abbas, 2005; Kibria, 2006) argue that when a minority group is faced with hostility, one of its first responses is to become more insulated and display a strong collective and 'reactive' identity (a 'victim' mentality) to those who oppose it. This process can lead some members of the minority group into a deliberate disassociation from the host society. This collective identity has resulted in the emergence of many Muslims who are either ideologically and spiritually engaged with a revival of Islam within the socio-political arena and in essence Muslims by name and identity and not by practice (Akhtar, 2005) or actively practising their faith through symbolic acts such as the daily prayer, the growth of the beard, the popularity of the hijab, observation of Ramadan, learning Arabic and going to annual pilgrimage (Hajj) in Saudi Arabia. As Castles and Miller (1993) note, for some minorities living in the West, it is their 'difference' which has become a "*mechanism of resistance*" against the West.

Birt (2005: 103) argues that many young Muslims have also developed a more politicised identity intent to absolve Islam from the charge of inherent violence and barbaric terror. There is also the growth of a minority educated professional body of British Muslims engaged in mainstream civic life through democracy, economic advancement and political lobbying and debating important issues such as citizenship, women's rights and foreign policy (Kamrava, 2006). In this respect, British theologian Philip Lewis (2007: 141-144) has argued that this minority Muslim group have gone "*beyond victimhood*" and have engaged in what the Muslim Swiss academic Tariq Ramadan has termed as "*critical citizenship*" (2004: 5-6).

2.4 The relationship between the international and the local

This section of the chapter examines some of the international factors that has witnessed the domestic evolvement of the British Muslim from ethnic/ racial ('Paki') to religious ('Bin-Laden') identifications (Marranchi, 2005) and from a "*passive*" to a "*troubled*" community after 9/11 (Hai, 2008). It also examines the development of a new type of racism (Barker, 1981) that has replaced skin colour and race as markers of separateness with differences in culture, way of life, values as the new markers of racist behaviour.

Whilst domestic factors such as inequality, poverty and social cohesion are important in the question of British Muslim identity (Snow, 2007: x), I argue that the international political climate has also pushed many Muslims into siding with an Islamic 'umma' against a perceived and antagonistic British state. In the modern 'global' world (Baylis & Smith, 2001) enhanced by technology and communications, international factors, namely interventions or wars against Muslim countries, have also heightened a sense of global Islamic awareness and has contributed to a brand of political Islam focused around protest and contest.

International incidents have direct local ramifications as local stories of discrimination and injustice are played out in the international arena. There is strong evidence for such a statement. For example, the first Gulf War (1990-91), American military intervention in Somalia (1992), the genocide in Bosnia-Herzegovina (1993-96), the Taliban in Afghanistan (1997-2002), Grozny and Kosovo (1999), the continuing plight of Palestinians in Gaza, the struggle for Kashmir, and the War on Iraq (2003) have all played a part in creating a transnational Muslim solidarity and a conscious identification with others of the same religion (Abbas, 2005: 14). In its most vibrant democratic example, this Muslim solidarity

was evident in the anti-war protest against the government in London in 2003⁶ in which many thousands of Muslims and non-Muslims took part in. In its most extreme manifestation, the bombings in London in July 2005 supposedly done in the name of Islam as a reaction to US and UK military intervention in Iraq.⁷ Both of these examples act as a reminder of the dual function of the politicisation of Islam both in its democratic and violent extreme capability. Lewis (2007: 140) notes further that the international wars involving Muslims reinvented the umma from one of global community to global “*victims*”.

I argue that the international geo-political climate has led to the development of Islamophobia in Britain. In recent times, Islamophobia as a term and as a form of unconscious and in some cases conscious (BNP, 2002) “*fear or dread*” (Abbas, 2006: 11) of Muslims has crept into British political and public debate. The findings of the Runnymede Trust (1997) and more recent studies by the European Muslim Research Centre (Githens-Mazer & Lambert, 2010) and others (MCB Press Release, March 2010; Boulding & Osborne, 2008) argue that a ‘fear’ and ‘dread’ of Muslims (Islamophobia) has become naturalised and normalised in many segments of British society.

This fear and dread of Muslims is steeped in many centuries of history as Western Europe, to prevent conversions to Islam, has resisted the imperialist virtues of hugely successful Islamic empires (Abbasid, Moghul, Ottoman)⁸. Esposito (1999) argues that despite the many positive contributions made towards Western science and culture by the Islamic world, many Western European governments throughout history have continuously characterised Muslims from the East as barbaric and intolerant religious zealots. Huntington, in his famous article of 1993,

⁶ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/2765041.stm>

⁷ Refer to comments made by one of the July 2005 London underground bombers, Mohammed Siddique Khan, *Al Jazeera*, 2nd September 2005

⁸ For a detailed analysis of the history of Islamic civilisations, refer to Armstrong, K (2004). *Islam: A Short History*, London: Phoenix

took this supposed division between the Islamic East and Christian West even further by claiming that both civilisations were diametrically opposed and irreconcilable. Following on in the same school of thought, Islam has been presented by Gove (2006) as the conflict of our times as it challenges Western values, culture and freedoms just like threats posed historically by fascism and communism. Although, Huntington's theory of this supposed 'Clash of Civilisations' has been criticised for its oversimplification and generalisation (Berman, 2004; Said, 2001; Sen, 2006), the popularity of his article has helped further to make divisions between Islam and the Christian West.

Abbas (2005: 11) argues that the 'otherization' - the construction and reduction of people to be 'less' than what they are - (Holiday et al, 2004; Ameli & Merali, 2006) of Muslims is still prevalent today especially since 9/11. For example, there is numerous research to suggest that a post 9/11 world has resulted in more low level abuse aimed at Muslims such as the negative alteration of the 'gaze' (Geaves, 2005: 67), people staring, bearded men being called 'Osama' (Ahmed, 2005: 203), being spat at (Birt, 2005: 103) and being called a terrorist simply because of Muslim clothing (Ansari, 2005: 161). Furthermore, much of the rhetoric that came from racist groups post 9/11 was highly inflammatory and it encouraged insult and provocation and employed language and images designed to encourage hatred (BNP, 2002). This anti-Muslim culture based on the demarcations of 'difference' and 'subordination' (Allen & Nielsen, 2002) was not simply limited to Britain as the Turkish community in Germany and the Algerians in France also experienced a political, public and media backlash in a post 9/11 world (Jocelyn, 2006).

The origins of contemporary Islamophobia is rooted in 'Orientalist' philosophy. The image of Muslims as a distinctive 'other' (different to that of the civilised West – a people unable to

govern themselves, people who lie, are cunning, lack initiative, unable to think logically) is an integral part of the way some Westerners, especially the political elite, understand themselves. The concept of the 'other' is discussed by Said (1979; 1995) in his analysis of 'Orientalism'. A colonial ideology, Orientalism as a discourse involves the exercise of power from the benevolent West (occident) towards the uncivilised East (orient). This thinking has helped the West to maintain hegemony over the oriental 'other' and legitimise existing systems of political domination and subordination (Abbas, 2005: 11). Said (1995) argues that the historical discourse of orientalism can also be applied to Islam in the modern context. This is most evident in the Arab-Israeli conflict as a clash between freedom-loving democratic Israeli's vs evil, totalitarian and terroristic Arabs. In his later works which examined media portrayals of Muslims, Said (1997) found that Muslims were generalized in terms of its violence, primitiveness, atavism and threatening qualities.

It was a report by the Runnymede Trust entitled Islamophobia: a Challenge for Us All in 1997 which first examined this *fear and dread* of Muslims and its findings were controversial in a pre-9/11 world. Islamophobia, it was suggested, was akin to xenophobia – a dislike of anything foreign. Despite over fifty years of residence in Britain, Muslims were still viewed as 'foreign'. The Runnymede Trust also highlighted seven other core features of this irrational fear and dread of Muslims:

- Muslim cultures were seen as monolithic;
- Islamic cultures were viewed as substantially different from other cultures;
- Islam was perceived as threatening;
- Followers of Islam used their faith for political or military advantage;
- Muslim criticism of Western cultures and societies was rejected and held no weight;
- The fear of Islam was mixed with racist hostility to immigration;
- Most notably, Islamophobia was presented as being natural and unproblematic.

Allen (2005: 49) argues that the findings of the Runnymede Trust (1997) report confirmed a shift in racist attitudes towards people of South Asian descent from a focus on race to religion:

“while racism on the basis of markers of race obviously continues, a shift is apparent in which some of the more traditional and obvious markers have been displaced by newer and more prevalent ones of a cultural, and socio-religious nature”.

The focus of much racist ideology in the present era, argues Allen (2005: 51), is now upon issues of cultural and religious ‘difference’. Events such as Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* (1989) which many commentators have argued led to the beginning of a problematic and specific ‘Muslim identity’ in Britain (Ahsan and Kidwai, 1991), 9/11, the 2001 street riots and 7/7 have provided credence to the rhetoric of ‘difference’. These events have entwined Muslims across the globe with violence and anti-Westernism and have also put the spotlight on the everyday values and norms of the British Muslim population (Abbas, 2005: 10). Central to this debate is the question of how Muslims can be allowed to practice their faith, beliefs and cultural lifestyles and co-exist in the very society (Western Europe) that the religion is so critical of.

The American Islamic historian Bernard Lewis has stated that due to high rates of immigration and Europe’s low birth rate, Western Europe will have Muslim majorities by the end of the century (quoted in Farouky, 2007). Furthermore, Bruce Bawer (2006), in his book *While Europe Slept* has suggested that Islamists are determined to colonise Europe. Claims such as these have heightened the fear and suspicion aimed towards Muslims in Europe with the suggestion that the London bombings, the French riots and the Danish cartoon protests are violent indicators of future events.

Bagguley and Hussain’s (2005: 208-213) study in Bradford after the riots of 2001 adds weight to Allen’s assertion that Islam has been presented as incompatible with British norms

and values. Bagguley and Hussain (2005: 213) found that the Denham (2002) and the Cantle Reports (2001) contributed to the overall climate of an essentialist and stereotypical portrayal of British Muslim ‘otherness’ structured around themes of “*intergenerational conflict, tolerance of criminality, a failure to integrate with mainstream white society and the oppression of women*”.

Furthermore, dress choice⁹, language choice, national allegiance (Bunting, 2004), questions of ‘arranged’ and ‘forced’ marriage¹⁰ have all become publically debated media issues and have presented Muslims as being somewhat ‘un-British’ in their attitudes, norms and values. Geaves (2005: 71) notes that a new political language championed by ‘new’ Labour emerged within the British political spectrum after the 2001 riots centred around ‘integration’, ‘community cohesion’ and ‘British values’.

There were many public figureheads who held Muslims responsible for their own predicament. For example, within a few months of September 11th 2001, Home Secretary David Blunkett MP, reiterating one of the key findings of the Cantle Report (2001), openly criticised the self-styled segregation of South Asian Muslims living in Britain and also attacked Muslims for not speaking English at home (Glover, 2001; Travis, 2001). Blunkett also attacked the tradition of arranged marriages still practised in many Muslim communities¹¹. Peter Hain MP followed suit with Blunkett (OSI, 2002) by suggesting that it was the Muslim community’s own isolationist behaviour and customs that was creating the climate in which the far right was prospering. Furthermore, Norman Lamont MP criticised the Muslim community for their participation in ‘forced marriages, polygamy, burning books

⁹ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/5414098.stm>

¹⁰ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/1809791.stm>

¹¹ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/1809791.stm>

and supporting fatwa's' and congratulated the West Indians, Africans and Indians for their sense of being British (Telegraph, 7th May 2002).

There is strong statistical evidence to support the 'self-styled segregation' argument. The Pakistani and Bangladeshi Muslim communities across Britain are very insular in trajectory. For example, due to strong family values marriage is almost an inter-ethnic affair. Peach (1999) highlights that 99 per cent of Bangladeshi women in 1991 were married to Bangladeshi men and 95 per cent of Pakistani women to Pakistani men. Furthermore, Peach (2005: 28; refer also to Anwar's study, 2005) also argues that Pakistanis and particularly Bangladeshis have shown high rates of segregation in urban areas. On a scale from 0 (no segregation) to 100 (complete segregation), Pakistanis segregated from the white community averaged 54 while Bangladeshis averaged 65. Bangladeshis tend to also live in concentrated areas such as Tower Hamlets that have been described as "*encapsulated communities*" (Eade et al, 1996).

Whilst the segregation of Bangladeshis and Pakistanis from mainstream society is a statistical reality, I argue that it is misleading to suggest that this segregation is by choice or is 'self-styled'. There are many socio-political complexities involved. Abbas (2005: 4) and others (Parekh, 2006: 185) remind us that the criticism of Muslim communities by Blunkett and his colleagues above is yet another example of how Muslims are somewhat viewed as perpetrators of their own misfortunes as opposed to victims of the "*hostile and racist structures of post-war British society and the institutions that form the very fabric of it*". Abbas (2005: 11, 12-13) argues:

"the young South Asian Muslim men of Oldham, Bradford and Burnley, who battled with the police in such dramatic scenes during the summer of 2001, do not suffer from 'under-

assimilation'. Indeed their predicament is that of a society divided by racism and discrimination... segregation of Muslims is seen to be self-imposed and the cause of racism rather than a result of it... It is easy to blame people and their values and to ignore processes and institutions”

Although important positive strides have been made in policy and practice which is slowly recognising Muslims in Britain as an equal and ubiquitous social partner within British society (discussed further in chapter nine), there are numerous studies which further Abbas's (2005) argument of structural and institutional racism (Macpherson, 1999). For example, Anwar & Baksh (2003; refer also to Hepple & Choudhury, 2001; Weller et al, 2001; Parekh, 2000) found that Muslims continue to experience discrimination in the field of employment as employers hold negative social attitudes of the hijab and the lifestyle choice of many Muslims prohibit them from engaging with the 'working culture' which involves drinking after work. Also, a recent report by Githens-Mazer & Lambert (2010) suggests an increase in anti-Muslim hate crimes throughout the United Kingdom.

The findings from these studies suggest that Muslims in Britain in the year 2010 are segregated more out of structural inequalities (Abbas, 2005; Parekh, 2006), institutional racism, social and economic marginalisation and deep ingrained socio-cultural reasons such as staying close to family and community rather than out of choice (Peach, 2005: 30; Ballard, 1990; Anwar, 2005: 37-38; Ahmad, 1996; Modood et al, 1997; Bagguley & Hussain, 2005).

2.5 The Bangladeshis of Tower Hamlets

Having discussed the 'macro' socio-political history of Islam in Britain, this chapter now focuses more on the localised situation involving Bangladeshi Muslims from Tower Hamlets. Overseas South Asian communities have different historical trajectories because they have

developed in widely divergent historical contexts in many parts of the world. As such, there is great diversity (numerically, socially and politically) within the experiences of South Asian settlement in Britain. After the regions of Punjab and Gujarat, the third largest South Asian settlement in Britain comes from the region of Sylhet in northeast Bangladesh. British Sylhetis represent by far the poorest segment of the South Asian presence in Britain and they also have the largest population growth rate. For example, from an estimated 6,000 in 1961 (Eade, 1998: 139), the number of people who identified themselves as ethnically Bangladeshi in 2001 according to the Census has risen to nearly 283, 000. Over 90 percent of Bangladeshi immigrants in Britain have come from predominantly five districts of Sylhet: Biswanath, Maulvi Bazaar, Beani Bazaar, Golapgonj and Nobigonj (Islam, 1995: 360).

The story of Sylheti emigration goes as far back as the late seventeenth century when, along with people from the regions of Noakali and Chittagong, Sylhetis performed menial tasks as seamen (lascars) for the British Navy (Visram, 1986: 34-54,191). During both of the World Wars, nearly 50,000 out of the 190,000 service men from the British Merchant Navy were of South Asian origin, often working as galley-hands.¹² This highlights the magnitude and importance of the role of lascars not only for Bangladeshi migration patterns but for the region of South Asia as a whole. The lascars tended to slip ashore illegally when docked in either Britain or New York. Adams (1987: 15-43) notes that fellow countrymen already residing in the country of destination provided these lascars with work and accommodation. These men predominantly resided in guesthouses such as the aptly named ‘Strangers Home’ which was located in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. Consequently, Tower Hamlets became the hub of the Bangladeshi Sylheti settlement in Britain.

¹² Tower Hamlets: A Journey Through Time Exhibition, Ragged School Museum, London E3, August 2003

The British Bangladeshi population is the largest Bangladeshi diaspora community outside of Bangladesh itself. Tower Hamlets has the highest percentage of Muslim population of all the local authorities in Britain (36 per cent) and also contains nearly a quarter of the total Bangladeshi population (70,000) of Britain (Peach, 2005: 28; Lewis, 2007: 21). The third generation Bangladeshis of Tower Hamlets, who are the main focus of this study, constitute approximately half of the total Tower Hamlets Bangladeshi population (Garbin, 2005: 1).

The London Borough of Tower Hamlets has a rich history of immigrants (Bhatia, 2006; Thornton, 1983; Bermant, 1975). From the Irish Catholic settlers (Lees, 1979; O'Connor, 1974) and Protestant Huguenot refugees from France (Plummer, 1972) during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, to the influx of Eastern European Jews (Newman, 1981; White, 1980) during the late nineteenth century and now a settlement of Bangladeshis which occupies nearly a third of the total population of Tower Hamlets (Adams, 1987; Fishman & Breach, 1979; Visram & Merriman, 1993). Tower Hamlets also has a rich history of political and social struggles. The Battle of Cable Street in 1936 and the Bangladeshi demonstrations against the National Front in the late 1970s highlight a tradition of protest and opposition.

Heightened Sylheti migration into Britain took place in the 1950s and 1960s through a system of 'chain migration' (Begum and Eade, 2005: 184; Desai, 1963: 1-67) – a complex system where primary settlers brought over their fellow village men. This explains the high concentration of Bangladeshis from one particular region of Bangladesh - Sylhet (Gardner, 1998). Not only did chain migration assist the likelihood of finding employment but in a process where migration can be quite a traumatic process, the existence of a familiar community in Tower Hamlets also "*humanize[d]*" the experience (Shah, 1998: 20). The

migration process was predominantly a male phenomenon (Davison, 1964: 5) in its early stages until the families started to come over in the late 1970s and 80s (Deakin, 1970). The tightening up of British immigration laws which restricted travelling back and forth from Bangladesh (Anwar, 1995: 276) convinced many of the male Sylheti workers in Britain to terminate their status as “*inter-continental commuters*” (Ballard, 1994: 150) and bring their dependents over to Britain. Family re-unification brought up the issue of how family life was going to be pursued in a non-Muslim and secular country.

As a result of second generation involvement in micro-politics, local government and other influential institutions such as community, health, education, youth and housing organisations (Asghar, 1996), Begum and Eade (2005: 184) note that sufficient pressure was exerted so that a process of ‘Islamicisation’ could occur within the local social system. For example, whilst mothers primarily took charge of the religious and Bangladeshi (language) education of the second generation (Ahmed, 2005), Islamicisation also occurred at a structural level such as halal food and Eid holidays at schools, cultural and religious dress being confidently worn in public places, culturally sensitive health and social workers, multi-lingual literature informing Bangladeshis of important events and news¹³ and most notably, the expansion of local mosques and prayer halls to facilitate the diversity, growth and expressions of the emerging generations (Lewis, 2007: 10-11; Marranchi, 2005: 225; Islam, 2008). The close-knit nature of the large Bangladeshi community in Tower Hamlets has therefore offered individuals a safe environment in which to confidently express and practise their faith and cultural life in public (Ahmed, 2005: 199).

¹³ For example, Tower Hamlets has a very popular and widely distributed community newspaper *East End Life* which has articles written in English, Bengali and Somali. Refer to www.towerhamlets.gov.uk

However, despite a sense of safety found in Tower Hamlets, as will be discussed later in chapter seven, there have been many incidents of racialised tension which has made many Bangladeshis re-examine notions of home, personal identity and national belonging. Furthermore, the voices of the participants of this study remind us that underachievement, intergenerational conflict, identity and racial alienation remain prime areas of concern for the third generation Bangladeshis.

2.6 Bangladeshi Muslims in Britain: a history of deprivation, poverty and underachievement

Abbas (2005: 9) notes that the South Asian Muslim immigrant population during the 1950s and 60s, like other immigrant communities, filled lower-echelon gaps in British society and were positioned at the bottom of the labour market often recruited into those industrial sectors most in decline (textiles, manufacturing). Accordingly, Abbas argues (2005:9), South Asian Muslims were disdained by the host society and “*systematically ethnicised and racialised*”. Abbas goes even further and suggests that their economic and social positions were located even below their white working class neighbours forming what many sociologists have termed an ‘underclass’.

A sociological examination of the complex and heavily critiqued (Lister, 1990; Ely & Denney, 1987) concept of the ‘underclass’ echoes a strong case for Bangladeshis being members of such a class. Bangladeshis in Tower Hamlets share many of the features of the underclass such as multiple deprivation, social marginality (Rex & Tomlinson, 1979) and welfare state dependency (Saunders, 1990; Dahrendorf, 1979). Furthermore, Castles and Kosack (1973) have argued that many white working class indigenous communities in Western Europe were able to attain upward social mobility in status and economic prosperity as they were in an advantageous position over the immigrant ‘other’.

In many ways, the Bangladeshi immigrant story in Britain is more about poverty¹⁴ and class than race (Rahman, 2007). The Pakistani and Bangladeshi first generation settlers in Britain, especially the Pakistanis who originated from the rural areas of Azad Kashmir, Mirphur and Punjab and the Bangladeshis from North East Bangladesh (Sylhet) were located in some of the most disadvantaged communities in Britain. They were likely to be living in inferior and overcrowded housing conditions, have a high rate of illiteracy and low educational achievement, possess the poorest health especially high rates of diabetes and heart disease and have high unemployment rates due to de-industrialisation and declining manufacturing, textiles and catering sectors (Tinker, 1977: 20-50).

Nearly fifty years on, the position of British Muslims in the year 2010 remains one of social and economic deprivation and alienation. Like their pioneer forefathers, British third generation Muslims still occupy the lower echelon gaps in modern society. They still rank high in terms of poor social housing, low income (Babb et al, 2006: 80), poor health, high unemployment and underachievement in education (Strategy Unit 2003; Brown, 2000; Modood et al, 1997; Gilborn & Mirza, 2000:10-11). For example, Bangladeshis had the most disadvantaged socio-economic position in 2001, with just over one in ten (11 %) of the working age population belonging to a managerial or professional occupation and twice that proportion (22%) belonging to a routine or semi routine occupation. They also had the highest percentage of 'never worked or long-term unemployed' (five times higher than that for the population as a whole – 16% compared to the average of 3 %) of all ethnic groups and also had the highest percentages of persons looking after the home which many

¹⁴ It must be noted that poverty is not only limited to the Bangladeshi community of Tower Hamlets. A recent survey by the Prince's Trust charity found that Tower Hamlets has the highest number of jobless families in the country, with 47 per cent of children having parents on unemployment benefits (Collins, 2010: 1)

commentators have noted has held back Muslim advancement as they choose to drop out of education or choose to study near home (Lewis, 2007: 27-47).

Furthermore, recent research from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2007) found that 70% of Bangladeshi children are growing up in poverty in Britain.¹⁵ Bangladeshi and Pakistani women also had the highest rate of economic inactivity (those who are neither in employment or unemployment). Compared to Indian women (55 per cent), only 22 per cent of Bangladeshi women aged 16 and over and 27 per cent of Pakistani women were economically active (Babb et al, 2006: 4-5; ONS: 2004). Muslims are also over-represented in the prison population with almost ten percent of the total population (Anwar, 2005: 44). These statistics argues Abbas (2005: 10) have helped to ensure that British South Asian Muslims remain at the bottom of society.

There are many reasons put forward explaining the relationship between the Bangladeshi community and poverty – self-imposed segregation (David Blunkett, 2001), increasing competition in labour market, lack of ambition (Rahman, 2007), difference between the attitudes and values of immigrants from urban and rural backgrounds (Snow quoted in Lewis, 2007), investment in Bangladesh and Pakistan and not in Britain, structural and institutional (Macpherson, 1999) and cultural racism (Abbas, 2005), linguistic barriers, de-industrialisation and so on. However, I argue that above all of the many reasons put forward for this bleak picture of British Bangladeshi Muslim poverty and deprivation, the high rate of educational underachievement is most concerning.

¹⁵ 'Poverty twice as likely for minority ethnic groups: education fails to close the gap', 30th April 2007, www.jrf.org.uk

Whilst the underachievement of Bangladeshis in education cannot be separated from the underachievement of working class pupils in general as there is a “*crucial relationship*” between education and poverty¹⁶, the continuous underachievement of Bangladeshis in education remains a cause for concern. For example, in 2006 40% of Bangladeshi boys and 49% of Bangladeshi girls were leaving school with no qualifications. Furthermore, only 5% of Bangladeshi girls and 11% of Bangladeshi boys were achieving university degrees. When compared to the Indian community who migrated around the same time as the Bangladeshis, the picture is even more alarming. In 2006, 30% of Indian students completed a degree course at university. Indian pupils were also excelling in GCSE education even above white pupils. Of those pupils who got five GCSEs or more in 2006, 74% were Chinese, 67% were Indian, whilst the Bangladeshi and Pakistani pass rate was relatively low (48% and 45%) respectively (Babb et al, 2006: 7, 41,43).

Many factors have been put forward for the relatively affluent and successful British Indian community, for example the hard work ethic and entrepreneurial skills (Snow, 2007). The one central reason however remains that of the complex relationship between education and poverty. The majority of the Indian immigrants came from urban and educated backgrounds in the 1950s and 60s and occupied skilled and managerial jobs (NHS, technicians, businessmen). They also live in more affluent areas of Britain and have access to better schooling and housing. In his analysis of the 90,000 Indians expelled from Uganda by Idi Amin in the 1970s, Snow (2007: ix-x) argues that compared to the majority of Pakistani and Bangladeshi immigrants who came from poor rural areas, the Ugandan Asians were “*tailor made to succeed*” in Britain as they arrived as a “*well educated entrepreneurial class*”.

¹⁶ ‘Experiences of poverty and educational disadvantage’, *September 2007*, www.jrf.org.uk

It is argued that this 'culture' of education, business and success has been passed down to the younger generations as longitudinal sociological studies have demonstrated that particular migration histories and experiences of the first generation of immigrants has an impact on the future of their children. In particular, those migrants who experience downward mobility upon migration such as the Pakistani and Bangladeshi migrants may see the next generation retaining its social class features (Platt, 2005).

Although Bunting (2004: 17) reminds us importantly of the existence of a polarised British Muslim community in that for every educated career professional, there are "*thousands of other young Muslims who are trapped in low skilled jobs or are unemployed*", the bigger picture, I argue, is not completely bleak as the above figures suggest. There is cause for optimism. More Bangladeshis, for example are performing better in education. Whilst the GCSE pass rates remain low for Bangladeshis in 2006 (48%) when compared to the national average, this statistic masks the fact that since 1992, the annual GCSE attainment level for Bangladeshis has been steadily improving (1992 = 14%, 1996 = 25%, 2000 = 29%, 2004 = 46%). There has nearly been a doubling of the number of Bangladeshis pupils achieving five or more GCSE pass rates since 1996 (Babb et al, 2006: 41). In addition, there is a correlation between those families and parents who themselves are educated which means that their children will follow suit (Platt, 2005).

Furthermore, the consequences of de-industrialisation and global capitalism and the decline of traditional South Asian Muslim employment sectors has meant that the third generation are entering into a more diverse arena of employment and are slowly becoming part of a growing educated and professional class (Bunting, 2004). There are increasing numbers of third generation Bangladeshis who are going onto higher education and becoming career

professionals (Anwar, 2005: 34). This is reflected in the career ambitions of the six respondents of this study. For example, Zeyba wants to go onto university, Taiba wants to go into youth work, Sanjida wants to become a teacher, Akbar and Saeed want to become entrepreneurs and Azad hopes to go into accounting.

2.7 Conclusion

On a ‘macro’ level, this chapter has examined the complexity and diversity of the British Muslim community and has argued that there are many faces of Islam in Britain. It has also outlined some of the socio-political reasons for the growth and popularity of Islam particularly among the younger third generation. This popularity must be viewed within the context of the global ‘war on terror’ which has given impetus to a domestic growth of Islamophobia, making the ‘fear’ of Muslims both natural and unproblematic. Both domestic and international events involving Muslims, it is argued, has transformed the domestic Muslim community from “*passive*” to “*troubled*” (Hai, 2008).

In this chapter, I have also argued that Muslims throughout history have been depicted as the barbaric ‘other’ whose values and lifestyle pose a threat to the Western/ British ‘way of life’. This is a very important statement to reiterate as it is within this context of the ‘other’ that the fears, stories, concerns and voices of the six respondents of this study must be located within and it is within this context that this whole thesis has been researched, written and analysed.

On a localised ‘micro’ level, I argue that it is the underachievement in education for Bangladeshis which warrants the most cause for concern and where the attentions of community leaders, policy makers and local area politicians should be geared towards. Although there is reason for optimism as education pass rates are slowly increasing and there

is an emerging professional class amongst the East London Bangladeshi population, the data analysis section of this thesis (part three) should be contextualised within the historical and ongoing struggles of poverty, racism, intergenerational conflict, identity confusion, marginalisation and Islamophobia affecting the third generation Bangladeshis from East London. The main objective of this chapter was to ‘set the scene’ and to provide history and socio-political context of Bangladeshi Muslims settled in Britain. The previous chapter (autobiographical) and the remainder of this thesis must be read with the complex issues raised in this chapter in mind.

Chapter 3

The Methodology Chapter: A Critical Analysis of the Narrative Approach to Research

3.0 Introduction

In order to find out the answers to the highly complex and personal research questions posed in the introduction of this thesis, I have decided to use an ethnographic narrative approach during the interviewing process in both the pilot and main study of my thesis. This approach to research has become very popular of recent (Gergen & Gergen, 1984; Gubrium et al, 1994; Hankiss, 1981). This chapter investigates the complexities, advantages and limitations of using a narrative approach to research by examining four major areas:

- The first part of the chapter examines both the personal and academic reasons for choosing a narrative approach over other methods of enquiry;
- The second part examines some of the limitations of my choice of methodology;
- The third part of the chapter investigates the complexities behind ‘outsider’ and ‘insider’ status whilst conducting ethnographic research;
- The conclusion discusses the themes of collaboration and authenticity.

Furthermore, an admission to the messy nature of the research symbolises the complexity of identity that I am trying to describe. The interviewer is central in the narrative approach to research and therefore it is useful if I make this explicit from the outset. It is acknowledged that there is an in-built imbalance in the power relationships between the researcher and the researched. I had to also grapple with ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ issues to research throughout the interviewing process (Miller & Glassner, 2004). As a researcher who is motivated personally and academically with the question of identity within the Bangladeshi community in East London and the future of the third generation, my role in the research process cannot

be under or overplayed. In short, my history, my skin colour, my attitude and my cultural identity will affect the level of conversation that occurs between myself and the respondents. We are both trying to get to grips with the complex processes of cultural, religious, social and political change that we are living through. Therefore, this research is as much about the future of the Bangladeshi community of East London as it is about the personal quest for self-recognition. This can only be achieved through the *storying* of our life experiences (Randall, 1995) like I have attempted to do in the autobiographical chapter (one) of this thesis.

3.1 Why the Narrative Approach over other methods of enquiry?

My choice of research tools has been influenced by three factors. Firstly, a semi-structured narrative approach was decided upon partly due to my own familiarity with this method of research. Also, the less rigorous face-to-face interview has become known as a soft approach to research (Davies, 1985; Jayaratne & Stewart, 1995). This qualitative ‘soft’ approach allowed for more authentic and honest conversation to take place between the respondents and myself.

Secondly, a more scientific or quantitative approach would not equip the respondents with the ‘voice’ which is so central to the personal accounts of family, culture, identity and so on. These are phenomena which are constantly in motion and difficult to define. My decision to use a more ethnographic phenomenological approach has been influenced by the useful distinction made between ethnographic and experimental/positivistic enquiry by Kamil, Langer and Shanahan (1985: 72):

Table 1: Major distinctions between ethnographic and experimental enquiry

Ethnographic enquiry	Experimental enquiry
A. Phenomenological base. Seeks to understand human behaviour from participant’s frame of reference.	A. Positivistic base. Seeks to learn facts and identify causes.
B. Systematically observes recurring patterns of behaviour as people engage in regularly occurring activities.	B. Sets variables that need to be understood in relation to each other – some (independent) can be manipulated to determine their effects on others (dependent).
C. Identifies and describes phenomena from beginning to end across cycles.	C. Tests relationships.
D. Develops hypotheses grounded in the event and driven by the conceptual framework of the study.	D. Preformulates research questions or hypotheses.
E. Uses field setting that can be further tested with naturalistic experiments.	E. Uses laboratory or field settings.
F. Confirms findings across a variety of information sources, contexts and time.	F. Computer interrater and statistical probability.

These viewpoints are rooted in different philosophical traditions. The experimental approach is rooted in the positivist school of thought (Comte, 1973; Durkheim, 1938; 1956; 1970) and primarily argues that it is possible to create a ‘science of society’ based on the same principles and methods of research (correlation, causation, multivariate analysis) as the natural sciences such as physics and chemistry. It was Durkheim (1938) who argued that it was possible and necessary to treat ‘social facts as things’. Social institutions and human beings, argued Durkheim, must be analysed with the same objectivity as scientists that study nature. As such, human behaviour can be treated in the same way as the behaviour of matter, that it can be measured objectively. Furthermore, Durkheim argued that the emphasis should centre on ‘facts’ and behaviour that can be directly observed. Factors which are not directly observable such as meanings and feelings are likely to be misleading therefore they must be disregarded as unreliable data.

The ethnographical approach, on the other hand, rejects many of the assumptions held by the positivist school of thought. The ethnographical approach to research essentially argues that human behaviour cannot be treated in the same way as matter because, unlike matter, human beings have consciousness, thoughts feelings, meanings, intentions and ideas. Human beings cannot be studied in the Durkheimian vision of ‘things’. Also, unlike matter, human beings do not simply react to the world. They act on the world in terms of the meanings they give to it. For human beings, meanings and purposes direct their behaviour. As such, human behaviour cannot be seen as merely a response to external stimuli. From an ethnographic point of view, human beings create their own meanings and construct their own social reality through their life experiences and through interaction with others around them.

Building on the thinking by American philosopher and social psychologist George Mead (1967[1934]), Blumer (1962; 1969) has called the above process “*symbolic interaction*”. Blumer argues that we recognise, interpret and act upon material things in our own environment as they have symbolic meaning for us. Meaning is subjective and cannot be measured by scientific and more quantitative methods of analysis. Meaning is highly individualised as human beings have different interests, assess situations differently, give that situation a subjective definition according to ‘their’ meaning and act on the basis of that meaning. Therefore, to ethnographers and phenomenologists such as Charlesworth (2000), human beings make sense of the world by imposing meanings and classifications upon it. It is these meanings and classifications that make up social reality. There is no objective reality beyond these subjective meanings which are individualised and steeped in local history, context, culture and rituals.

It is ‘truthfulness’ and ‘trustworthiness’ (Alasuutari, 1995: 47) of the information that the respondents give me that is important in the research process. For this, Droysen’s (1960) useful distinction between ‘mechanistic’ and ‘humanistic’ methods to check or improve the truthfulness of the information given merits discussion. These two approaches to research are based on the philosophical approaches of the positivist and phenomenological/ ethnographic methodologies respectively. The mechanistic method suggests that in the quest for objective knowledge and truth, sometimes people are misled and cheated. The humanistic method, on the other hand, is primarily concerned with the concept of “*rapport*” (Berg, 1989: 29-30; Bogdan and Taylor, 1975:45-48). The building of rapport was vital in this research. Building rapport with the respondents ensured a relationship built on trust (Oakley, 1981) and also contributed to more candid, open and honest conversations throughout the research process. I established this “*rapport*” with my respondents through basing our conversations on the premise of confidentiality, non-judgemental responses, trust, authenticity and honesty (Alasuutari, 1995: 47-62; Miller, 2001). It was important that “*rapport*” enabled the participants to feel comfortable enough during the interviews to “*talk back*” and provide insight and meanings of their social worlds (Blumer, 1969: 22).

Although this research is predominantly ethnographic, some statistical (quantitative) data, however, does have its use. For example, the initial questionnaire I carried out with 103 pupils from Stepney Green School in 2004 provided me with a general synopsis of attitudes and opinions towards complex issues such as cultural and national identity. If my life experience to date and the experiences of my nephews and nieces informed me that the question of identity was a messy and complex one for British born Bangladeshis, then the questionnaire at Stepney Green helped confirm this initial hunch. The statistical data also provided me with a general idea of the questions which generated heated and passionate

responses to the questions which commanded a one word answer. As such, the questionnaires helped formulate the future direction of the research.

Furthermore, by colour and thematically coding the interviews carried out with the six main participants of this study, I was able to note regularities, patterns and re-occurring themes emerging from the data (refer to [appendices 4,5,6](#)). An interview timing grid, for example, highlighted to me the number of times certain sub-themes emerged throughout the interviews. The timing reference also enabled me to locate the exact time of the interview when a sub-theme was discussed which was useful when analysing the interviews. Therefore, this quantitative approach had a practical benefit to it (refer to [appendix 6](#)). The combination of both qualitative and quantitative methods, or triangulation, therefore, can be of benefit to the overall research process (Bryman, 1988; Barker, 1984; Corrigan, 1981) as it can help facilitate and complement the differing approaches to social research (Hammersley, 1996).

The third reason why I have chosen the narrative approach for this research is because it enabled me to capture the complexity of identity that I wished to observe. The narrative approach gave me insight into the ‘voice’, the life stories and the complex and highly personal accounts of identity, culture and history. It allowed the respondents to dictate and lead the conversation. Furthermore, an ethnographic enquiry as highlighted by Kamil, Langer and Shanahan (1985) allowed me to examine the very areas of research which are pertinent to the storying of one’s identity: the dialogue, the power relationships, the subjectivities of both the researcher and the researched, the personal accounts and the messiness and fluidity of identity. For example, how their ‘Bangladeshi-ness’ interconnects with or rejects their ‘British-ness’, their religious identity and other forms of identity

The ethnographic focus on issues such as culture, community and identity will also provide us with a great deal of in-depth information about life in East London. The respondents will provide us with rich detail and give us an insight of ‘their’ world, ‘their’ values, ‘their’ community(ies), ‘their’ families, ‘their’ experiences, ‘their’ hopes, assumptions and ambitions. These are the insights, the details, the ‘thick description’ of their lives that I, as an ethnographer, am concerned with in this study (Geertz, 2000[1973]: 9-18; Ryle, 1971).

The narrative approach puts the emphasis on the researched. This approach has been labelled a “*methodology of listening*” as it allows the participants to set the agenda (Glassner & Loughlin, 1987: 37; Francis, 1993). It also gives them the freedom to tell their side of their story and to ‘voice’ their version of events. As Francis (1993: 70) notes:

“The aim of the interview is to have the interviewee thematise the phenomenon of interest and make the thinking more explicit”

Whilst not capturing the ‘actuality’¹⁷ of the experience as peoples practical and emotional “*experiences are far more complicated than they could actually express or tell you in words*” (Silverman, 2005: 46), the adoption of a semi-structured narrative approach to interviewing allowed the respondents to discuss highly personal, subjective, controversial and important themes in their lives such as family and peer related issues in great depth.

The narrative approach enabled me to hear about these life-stories. It enabled me to hear their ‘truth’ in their own words. Like Plummer (1995: 5), I believe that:

“storytelling.... Has become recognised as one of the central roots we have

¹⁷ Although it too has its limitations (Garfinkel, 1967; Walsh, 2004), participant observation may be a more appropriate choice of methodology in trying to capture the ‘actuality’ of the experience

into the continuing quest for understanding human meaning.”

It is hoped that my “*active*” participation in the interviews (Gubrium & Holstein, 2004) and my experience of the research process also “*become the reader’s experience as well*” (Stocking, 1983: 106). This research was not concerned about seeking out absolute truths but rather, it was conducted in the knowledge that it would contribute interesting opinions, insights and commentaries to an ongoing important public discourse concerning cultural, linguistic, racial, religious, national and gendered identities.

3.2 Limitations with the narrative approach to research

A critical discussion of my choice of research methodology highlights many limitations. Firstly, we must be cautious about the generalisations we can make from the data received, especially from a relatively small sample size. How representative and authoritative are the nine respondents (three from pilot study and six from main study) of the East London Bangladeshi third generation community? Furthermore, the respondents could be considered unreliable by many earlier ethnographers such as Griaule (1948) as they may not have an unambiguous and authoritative view of their own culture.

Secondly, any interview data from autobiography must be put into context. In their analysis of life histories, Hatch and Wiseniewski (1995) raise some important common factors present in autobiographical work:

- Life histories were individual, contextually situated stories;
- Life histories were unique and differed from other types of qualitative research because of its focus on the individual, the personal nature of the research process and the clear emphasis and claim on subjectivity

There are other problems with the conduct of autobiographical writing. Self reflection through autobiography is also not a natural course of action despite the personal nature of the project. Olney (1972: 26) suggests that “*without a self one cannot write about it, but whatever one writes will be about the self it constructs*”. Because of the reliance on memory, because of the selection which takes place in the human mind when recalling events, because of the conscious nature of storytelling, it can be argued that the stories being told are mere ‘constructs’ or ‘fiction’ (Carr, 1986) of the human imagination.

The celebration of the individual (Weintraub, 1978; Buckley, 1984; Alasuutari, 1995), the confessional element (Leiris, 1946) and the creative (Tagore, 1917) and selective process renders autobiography as a self-centred act. However, reflection of the self through narrative in this complex postmodern era of globalisation can offer the individual many benefits.

Rooted firmly in this debate is the central theme of this research – identity. The telling of stories enables the individual to construct their personal and social identities (Murray, 1989) and also make sense of his/ her identity in an era undergoing rapid technological, social, economic and political change (Hall, 1996; Giddens, 1991; Kearney, 2003). The modern world is a place where individuals face so much insecurity, dislocation, confusion, rejection and risk (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000). It is a world where one finds it difficult to define or construct oneself as others are doing the construction on their behalf (Hall, 1996: 5-6). It is also a world where there is a “*compression of our spatial and temporal worlds*” (Harvey, 1989: 240) where it is difficult to grasp a sense of self as we cross so many cultural, racial, ethnic, linguistic and geographical boundaries. Reissman (1993) argues that amidst this uncertainty, narratives can sometimes provide a common platform for people to retell or come to terms with particularly sensitive or traumatic times and events. As such, a

storytelling method of research provides the participants with the platform to discuss sensitive cases of racism or family issues amongst others.

Many individuals, therefore, make sense of their identities through autobiography. Giddens (1991: 5) has suggested that the self is a “*reflective project... which consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives*”. In other words, we make sense of our history, our ‘self’, our identities through the storying of our experiences, through autobiography. Sarup (1996: 15-16) argues, “*we construct our story, and hence our identity*” and “*we construct our identity at the same time as we tell our life-story*”. There is a close relationship between the self and narrative. I argue that a more structured positivist approach to interviewing would have restricted some of the knowledge sharing and responses between the researcher and the researched. Therefore, there is a role for ‘subjectivity’ in the context of this research project.

Thirdly, Miller and Glassner (2004: 127) highlight a further limitation in the storytelling approach to research:

“The language of the interviewing... fractures the stories being told. This occurs inevitably within storytellers narrative, which must be partial if it is not to be unbearably boring. In the qualitative interview process, the research commits further fractures as well. The coding, categorisation and typologising of stories result in telling parts of stories, rather than presenting them in their ‘wholeness’”

I searched for the patterns that connected the participants rather than the “*wholeness*” (Charmaz, 1995: 60) of the stories told during the interview process. It is noted that the researcher sometimes selects parts of the interview that he/she wishes to use for the purposes of illustration and furthermore constructs the identity and point of view of the respondent (ten Have, 1998). Also, the conversations I had with the respondents cannot be considered to be ‘objective’ facts as they were laden with subjective and partial accounts of life experiences.

The conversations went through an unconscious process of selection and were based on memory and interpretation of past, present and future events (Murray, 1989).

However, this should not necessarily be viewed as a limitation. Rather, if the life history of the individual is seen for what it actually is – a subjective personal account situated in culture, history, time and place (Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995; Glassner & Loughlin, 1987), then it enables the reader to ‘enter’ the world of the respondent. Furthermore, as well as enabling us to understand human and social behaviour through the stories of unique individuals, if we are to concede that the self is constructed through narrative, then the “*parts*” of the stories that were told during the interview process must be of importance and relevance in the formation of the interviewee’s complex identity.

A critical discussion of the limitations of the narrative approach to research above pushes for a closer examination of the ‘reliability’ (Hammersley, 1990; Peräkylä, 2004) and ‘validity’ (Hammersley, 1992) of the respondents who were (maybe):

- Relying on their memory - considered to be unreliable in terms of accuracy or recall;
- Being subjective in their accounts of their history;
- Only telling ‘parts’ of the story;
- Engaging in involuntary error or intentional error (‘lying’) (Ellen, 1984: 235);
- Responding to me based on who I was as well as the social categories to which I belong (age, gender, class, race) (Miller & Glassner, 2004);
- Affected by the dynamics and psychology of the interview situation (Hyman et al, 1954);
- Not the authoritative voices of the East London third generation Bangladeshis;
- Inventing and constructing idealised and favourable versions of themselves;
- Telling me what I want to hear as opposed to what they want to tell me (interview bias);

- Affected by the power imbalance generated by the fact that I was a university based researcher and they were passive subjects of research (or were they?) (Alasuutari, 1995)

These limitations raise some important questions. For example, do all of these factors invalidate storytelling as a research method and does it give us an accurate picture of the individual telling us the story or the community they claim to represent ? I argue that these factors do not invalidate the narrative approach to research as *“information about social worlds is achievable through in-depth interviewing”* (Miller and Glassner, 2004: 126).

This research is concerned with some key criteria for the narratives such as apparency and verisimilitude (Van Maanen, 1988), trustworthiness (Reissman, 1983; Alasuutari, 1995), transferability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), *“repisodic memory”* - a memory constructed from repeated episodes of the same type (Neisser, 1982), co-authorisation, ownership and the *“collectivity”* of the interview situation (Silverman, 2005: 47), *“intersubjectivity”* (Shield and Dervin, 1993: 67) and explanatory, invitational quality, authenticity, adequacy and plausibility (Clandenin and Connelly, 2000). However, factors such as accuracy, representation, validity and reliability are also important in the research process. As such, through highlighting the methodological complexities of ‘outsider’ and ‘insider’ status whilst conducting ethnographic research, the remainder of this chapter will attempt to analyse some of the issues posed above.

3.3 Interpreting the Respondents as *both* an ‘outsider’ and an ‘insider’

The issue of ‘interpretation’ in research is complex and has received much debate, discussion and attention within the research community (Bassnett-McGuire, 1980; Manning, 1967). As a researcher, how did ‘I’ interpret the stories of the respondents and what ‘meaning’ did ‘I’ attach to the data available from the conversations that I had with them ? Did I really

understand their worldview, their intentions, their meanings, their experiences, their life stories ? How did I interpret these subjectivities onto paper and furthermore analyse them according to the meaning and context attached to them (Oates, 1999)? For example, did the thirty three year old researcher in me really understand the context and coding of modern urban language used by younger people such as “*cotch*”, “*minor*”, “*don’t watch*”, “*bear*” amongst many others ?

These were important questions for me to consider.

A sophisticated understanding of the feminist school of thought of representing ‘otherness’ enabled me to partially answer the questions posed above. I am both an ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ (Miller & Glassner, 2004) and these have both advantages and limitations from a research point of view (Kikumura, 1998). How accurately and authentically did I represent the respondents on the premise that my experiences, worldview and what feminist philosopher Tanesini (1999) and others (Harding, 1986; Stanley & Wise, 1993) have referred to as my “*standpoint epistemology*” is significantly different to the participants ?

My life experience is paradoxically similar, yet, at the same time different to theirs. I may be Bangladeshi but essentially I am older than them, I am from a different generation (second generation), more educated than them, have travelled the world, I am from a different gender to the female respondents (Kramarae, 1992), live in a different part of East London and steadily aspiring towards middle class status. How did these differences enable me to see the world from ‘their’ point of view ? How did I make sense of their life-stories in light of the differences between us ? Moreover, how did my background, experience and position effect the responses from the participants ? I am not a stereotypical ‘white’ professional researcher

so did the interviewees wonder why a Bangladeshi was conducting this piece of research ? Did I also represent the ‘other’ to them ? Or did they accept me as one of their own ? Did my ‘standpoint epistemology’ act as a barrier or as an ice-breaker in establishing “*rapport*” ? Most importantly, were the responses from the participants shaped by the differences between us ? Should I then, as posed above, question the reliability and validity of the stories told by them ?

Again, these were important questions for me to consider.

At no point throughout my research did the fact escape me that I might be embroiled in the ‘observers paradox’ (Labov, 1972) – that my very presence may have impacted upon the behaviour of the participants. Ordinary and everyday speech is left to one side in an interview situation. Creating a natural context is very important in the narrative process especially when working with young people (Eder & Fingerson, 2002). A person’s pattern of speech changes when they know that their speech will be used again in the future in an attempt to represent them. They are wary of making mistakes and may ‘invent’ or ‘construct’ a world that is not their reality. This kind of talk is usually staged and undergoes constant revision throughout the interview process. It becomes structurally and grammatically coherent and strikes more of a chord with written language than to ordinary everyday speech. This constant revision of language is evident in my own life. For example, my style of language changes according to who I am speaking to. I am comfortable most in speaking to my family and friends. My speech pattern changes, however, when I speak to official people. For example, in an interview scenario with BBC television and radio broadcasters or when speaking to my PhD supervisor.

Many of the young people that I have encountered thus far in my capacity as a researcher and as a youth worker have owned up to the fact that they sometimes change their behaviour, language and attitude when they are around me (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). This, I think, is mainly because some of them look up to me because of my academic and professional status and because I received an MBE for services to youth justice in 2008. I have noted that some try and impress me with long words. This is an example of what Oates (1999: 39) describes as language being “*used out of context*”, using formal language in an informal setting.

This illustrates how we as researchers should not attach a single meaning to any given response or experience (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997). For example, the six participants from the main study referred to me as “*Aminul Bhai*” which is a respectful way of calling me ‘older brother’. Also, some of them refrained from smoking cigarettes in my presence as a sign of respect. I have never prohibited them from doing so. The respecting of elders is a key aspect of Bangladeshi culture. I was aware that many issues were hidden from me and many words were altered when we engaged in conversation. Therefore, whilst being an ‘insider’ breeds a comfort level, it also prohibits the interviewees from discussing certain issues. It was evident that their conversations with me was just one version of ‘their’ truth which was influenced by my familiarity and social background.

Furthermore, it was clear that their answers to my questions was as Schegloff (1984:28-52) contests, “*context shaped*” and would have differed depending on who they were having the conversation with. For example, their usage of language and depth of information provided would have been different around their peers and family members. This raises the important methodological problem about whether interview responses are to be treated as giving direct access to ‘experiences’ or as actively ‘constructed narratives’ depending on who the

interviewee is talking to (Gubrium & Holstein, 1995). I was aware of the “*context shaped*” nature of responses from the participants of this study and that certain issues were held back from me.

The question of ‘ownership’ was also a key consideration during the research process. Even though I followed Francis’ (1993) phenomenological approach which allowed the interviewee to have more control of the agenda, the fact that the idea for the research project originated from ‘myself’ and the fact that although unstructured and open in conversation, there were some key themes that ‘I’ wanted the respondents to talk about (DeVault, 1991), brings into scrutiny the issues of power, knowledge, control and ownership during the interview exchange.

The question of ownership is complex. Whilst I directed the interviews, I was nonetheless reliant on the data from the participants (Ellen, 1984). I was aware of the imbalance of power or as Heritage (1984: 237) calls it, this “*asymmetry... on a moment to moment basis... [during] social interaction*”. Power is not a fixed phenomenon during an interview situation. Using the example of himself being interviewed in 1984, Foucault argued that the relationships of power during interviews are “*changeable, reversible and unstable*” (cited in Bernauer & Rasmussen, 1988: 12). He argued that the interviewer, if young, may initially be intimidated by the age and experience of the interviewee. However, during the course of the interview, the interviewee may himself become intimidated by the youth of the interviewer. Like Foucault, I was often aware during the interviews with the six participants of this study that the relationship of power between us was subject to many fluctuations and changes.

I devised two strategies during the interviewing phase in an attempt to negate this “*asymmetry*” as much as possible. Firstly, I sent copies of the questions and themes that I wished to explore to the respondents beforehand and also gave them a briefing of my own reasons for the research before any interviews took place (refer to [appendix 2](#)). Adding to Francis’ (1993) phenomenological approach, I also adhered to the ‘paramountcy principle’ as taken from the [Children Act, 1989](#) when working with young people (Walsh, 2000). This principle puts young people at the centre of everything. It empowers them by engaging them in the decision-making process, by keeping them involved and informed of developments, by consulting them on important issues, encourages confidentiality and treats young people like adults (Hoque, 2004a). This “*two-way process*” (Silverman, 2005: 47) and co-authored approach to interviewing bred confidence within the respondents and motivated them and also enabled me to build a “*rapport*” with the participants.

Secondly, the follow up interviews with the six participants enabled me to tackle questions of reliability and validity. I was guided by Riessman’s (1993: 64) criteria for approaching validity in narrative inquiry whilst transcribing the first interviews. This assisted me in determining the authenticity of the interviews:

persuasiveness: is it reasonable and convincing ?

correspondence: can it be taken back to the researched ?

coherence: does it provide a coherent picture of the situation described ?

pragmatic: to what extent can we act upon it ?

After transcribing the first interviews and colour coding them into categories¹⁸, I was able to note many re-occurring themes and patterns and take these back to the respondents in the follow up second interview. I also presented to them drafts of the first transcripts and allowed

¹⁸ For example of colour coded transcription and coded themes, refer to appendices 4, 5 and 6

them time to review the document in an attempt to counter areas of misquotation and misrepresentation. Although criticised for the fact that I was attributing “*privileged status*” to the respondents by asking them to commentate on their own work (Fielding & Fielding, 1986: 43), I argue that by engaging in what Reason and Rowan (1981) have referred to as “*respondent validation*”, I was able to refine my thoughts and data in light of their reactions. I was also able to probe further areas of contradiction and confusion highlighted from the data analysis of the first interview.

However, despite these strategies, it is recognised that the “*asymmetry*” in power and social differences did create a cultural, linguistic and communication gap between the researcher and the researched (Briggs, 1995) and positioned me as an ‘outsider’ during the research process. The current research, however, does not try to make the distinction between the researcher and the researched as traditional mainstream research tends to do (Waldby, 1995). The emphasis was on “*intersubjectivity*” and the understanding that the researcher was “*active*” during the interview exchange (Gubrium & Holstein, 2004; Becker, 1970) and was part of the production of knowledge (Shields & Dervin, 1993). This acknowledgement of “*intersubjectivity*” is the hub of feminist epistemology. The acknowledgement of one’s own subjectivities and life experiences and how this impacts on the knowledge production process is central in feminist thought (Acker et al, 1996) and was also a key consideration in the current research.

Despite some social differences, the fact that I had many ethnic, religious and cultural commonalities with the respondents naturally meant that much of the interpretation and reaction to the findings was not objective and was interpreted by my understanding of ‘their’ world. This was not necessarily a barrier. I fully acknowledge that my “*attitude[s]*”, values

and worldview informed my interpretation of what the respondents said (Temple, 1999: 53). This may have led me to “include” and “exclude” certain facts and attempt to “authorise” the narrative accounts of their lives (Banting, 1999: 2). However, it could be argued that I, as both the interpreter and the researcher, engaged in what Edwards (1998: 197) has referred to as the process of “critical reflection”.

Many champions of the reflexive ethnographic approach such as Davies (1999) have echoed the benefits of the interviewer’s familiarity with the respondent’s world. Along with establishing a rapport with the respondents, familiarity with the respondent’s world enables the interviewer to make sense of many of the context specific cultural and localised nuances. It is not always possible to be objective in the research process as I was not able to remove myself from the research account. I too, like the respondents, am a Bangladeshi living in East London, have the same skin colour, have experienced life in a Tower Hamlets housing estate and am also from the same cultural background (dress, eating habits). It can be argued that these commonalities (‘insider’ status) put me in a better position to understand their views as I have gone through similar experiences as them although it is readily acknowledged that assumptions regarding *sameness* can, as much as those regarding *difference*, lead a researcher to miss the nuances of meaning, or to make assumptions about meaning based on the researcher’s expectation of shared language and understanding (Temple, 1999: 49).

In addition, an assumption on the part of the interviewee of *sameness* can potentially lead them to leave out information which is assumed to be shared and therefore need not be said. The respondents may have left out vital information about estate life, police harassment or racism on the streets, expecting me to fill in the gaps. Because of the *sameness*, they may assume and presume commonality of understanding. For example, Saeed continuously used

the phrase “*you know how it is*” throughout his interviews. This perception, however, worked in my favour as it enabled the respondents to feel safe and thus talk more, on the premise that I understood what was being said. In instances where it became apparent that information was being left out because of *sameness*, I always probed further and asked for clarification.

Being aware of the partiality of my viewpoint towards the respondents has worked in my favour. I may not represent the objective ‘truth’ as many aspects of talk and speech was either hidden from me or constructed in an unnatural way. This research, however, is predominantly concerned about seeking patterns that connect the participants and illumination, and is not in search of abstract ‘truth’. Our shared experience instilled a deep sense of connection and thus put me in a better position to understand the respondents. Furthermore, the fact that I knew that I was subjectively engaged with the researched propelled me to try that extra bit harder in my attempt to gauge accurate knowledge. Tanesini (1999: 153) summarises my thoughts:

“Acknowledgement of the partiality of one’s own angle on reality encourages a politics of solidarity in the awareness that one does not have a complete knowledge of social reality: one may thus be disposed to learn what other marginal standpoints have to offer. This approach does not only have political advantages, it also facilitates more accurate knowledge of social relations.”

Whilst there may be many advantages as an ‘outsider’ such as detachment and objectivity (Rabe, 2003), I argue that this research has been enhanced because of my ‘insider’ knowledge. Once again, I adopt a feminist approach to research:

“When, as a feminist and researcher, I ‘speak for’ other women... I can use voices of others from (my understanding of) their positions, but I can never speak/write from their positions.... I can only pass on selected aspects of (what they have shown me about) their lives.” (Griffin, 1996: 101)

And this was one of the main objectives behind this research - not to speak for other minority ethnic people of Bangladeshi origin but take a snapshot of what they have shown and told me

about their lives, experiences and feelings and encapsulate this in a written format. Provide, as Silverman (2005: 49) argues, “*one slice of the cake.*”

3.4 Conclusion

There is an increasing acknowledgement in methodological discussions that people involved in research should be considered as participants in it and not subjects of it as both the researcher and the researched contribute to the final product. I am aware that I played an “*active*” role in the interviewing process and was not a passive facilitator or observer. As Gubrium & Holstein (2004: 140) argue:

“...it cannot be any other way, no matter how hard interviewers might try to diminish their presence in the interview exchange... interactional, interpretive activity is a hallmark of all interviews. All interviews are active interviews”

I adopted a reflexive approach throughout the research process. My broad and open-ended questions, as Silverman (2005: 47) reminds us, are not simply “*gateways to authentic accounts*” but an “*important part of the [interviewing] process through which narrative[s] [will] collectively be assembled*”. The word “*collectively*” is important here as it highlights the story-telling interview as being a “*two-way process*”.

The term reflexivity has been the subject of much debate within the research community (Davies, 1999; Byrne, 2004) but my starting position is of England’s (quoted in Pini, 2004: 2) understanding of reflexivity as a process involving the “*self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious analytical scrutiny of the researcher.*” By exposing my partiality, by discussing my intersubjectivities, by making transparent the context in which knowledge was produced during the interviews and the subsequent analysis of the interviews, I have left myself open for much scrutiny and interrogation. It is my subjectivity, my honesty and my search for, as Riessman (1993) states, “*trustworthiness*” not “*truth*”, therefore,

which is at work and it is this process of reflexivity which will provide depth, detail and ‘thick’ description (Geertz, 2000[1973]: 3-32) for insightful analysis to take place as we examine the complexity of third generation Bangladeshi identities.

Chapter 4

A Pilot Study & Literature Review

4.0 Introduction

Having stated my personal and academic reasons for this study, provided a socio-political history of the context in which third generation Bangladeshi identities are taking shape and outlined a case for a narrative approach to research in the previous chapters, this chapter now moves onto examining some of the research questions posed in the introduction of this thesis by interviewing three third generation Bangladeshis from East London as part of a pilot study. As well as introducing and reviewing the key literature, this chapter also locates the personal voices of these three respondents within some of the wider theories, arguments and concepts concerning issues of identity, language, race, religion and multiculturalism that are important contributors to the complex and multifaceted identities of third generation Bangladeshis. A more detailed critical examination of the theories takes place in the data analysis section of this thesis (part three).

The purpose of the pilot study is twofold. Firstly, it enables me to test some of the research questions on the target population and secondly, it helps determine and finalise the precise nature of questioning and important areas of further research that merits investigation as part of the main study (Ellen, 1984: 225).

This chapter is divided into six sections:

- The first part of this chapter provides some background information about the three respondents of the pilot study;

- The second, third and fourth parts of this chapter locates the key findings of the pilot study within the wider literature;
- Part five of this chapter discusses the emergence of what I have termed a ‘Br-Islamic’ identity;
- The final section of this chapter summarises some conclusions from the pilot study and sets the research framework for the main body of this study.

4.1 Background Information of the three respondents from the pilot study

The three participants (Iqbal, Ashraf and Hassan) of the pilot study came from a youth project based in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. All three respondents were British born Bangladeshi males. The three participants were self-nominated after they responded to a leaflet advertised in their youth club. Interviewing three females as part of the main study highlighted some gendered issues specific to Bangladeshi female identities. These issues are discussed in greater depth in chapter ten. All three respondents of the pilot study were seventeen years of age and attended the local college. All three respondents were interviewed separately throughout June 2005. The location for the interviews was their youth centre where they felt comfortable and relaxed.

Using an ethnographic approach to research, the main aim was to allow Iqbal, Ashraf and Hassan to guide the conversations and for them to talk about their experiences of growing up in the East End of London (Francis, 1993). Some of the key findings of the pilot study were as follows:

- Despite being born in Britain, the notion of ‘home’ and the ‘homeland’ was not clear-cut for the participants;
- It is more appropriate to talk about *identities* than *identity* when discussing third generation Bangladeshis from Tower Hamlets. They are members of many different

- Experiences of racism and racial exclusion has contributed to a ‘them’ vs ‘us’ mindset for many;
- Britishness as a concept was ‘fuzzy’ for them and despite living an overtly British lifestyle, the participants felt disassociated from the country of their birth;
- A new positive identity (Br-Islam) has been created by many third generation Bangladeshis which allows them to exert their multifaceted identities of being British born Bangladeshi Muslims comfortably in public spaces.

The remainder of this chapter discusses the above findings within the wider literature available on these subject matters.

4.2 Neither here nor there

What Hall (1996: 2) has referred to as the “*politics of location*” plays a pivotal role in the identity question. The confusion over whether the three participants were Bangladeshi (country of origin) or British (country of residence) is an argument echoed by many commentators within the field of migration and identity studies (Grillo, 2001; Bate, 2001; Islam, 1987; Balibar, 1995; Bhabha, 1996). The complexity of ‘belonging’ and ‘acceptance’ is difficult to achieve in the land of settlement due to racial, class and cultural differences (Tinker, 1977: 20-50; Holmes, 1988: 275-317; Westwood, 1995: 197-221). It is also difficult to achieve in the land of ancestral origin mainly due to disparities in wealth and differences in culture between Sylhetis from London and their counterparts from Bangladesh (Islam, 1987: 366). Bates (2001: 1-45) argues that identities based on historic claims to the homeland, are secondary to the practical realities of inter-ethnic divisions which come as a result of class or wealth based differences, gender differences, caste politics, and division over claims to territory all of which lead onto competition, conflict and identity confusion between

individuals from the same ethnic and national background. As a result of non-acceptance in both societies (Maalouf, 2000), it is argued that many are caught within the “*betwixt and between*” (neither here nor there) phase of transmigration (Grillo, 2001).

Ashraf felt “*weird*” during his visits to Bangladesh and Iqbal felt displaced. Hassan, however, felt a sense of connection with his relatives in Bangladesh. For some British born Bangladeshis, this “*logic of belonging*” (Balibar, 1995: 186-190) is present because there is a belonging to a “*network*” of cultures which is not limited to where you are born. For Hassan, it is more appropriate to talk about ‘identity(ies)’ as opposed to ‘identity’ as there is an “*intersection*” between his Bangladeshi and British identities.

Furthermore, the experiences of the three respondents is an example of the transnational and fluid nature of identity in the contemporary world where the pervasive nature of capitalism, technological innovation (Giddens, 1991:2) and increased global human migration (Bhabha, 1996: 52-54) has contributed to a “*crisis*” of identity (Kearney, 2003: 45). Giddens (1991: 2) and others (Hannerz, 1992:107; Kearney, 2003: 47; Hall, 1996: 4) argue that we should accept that our personal and social boundaries will need constant re-invention and re-definition in a complex transnational world where there is an “*asymmetry*” between people in terms of power, wealth and representation. Situated within this complex and dynamic global society where there is a constantly changing view of ‘self’ responding to rapid social and technological changes, I argue that the identities of Ashraf, Iqbal and Hassan are not fixed:

“Bangladesh is a place I go for a holiday. I was born here [Britain] and this is my home although as a person of colour, I don’t think I am welcome here” (Ashraf)

“I am a British Muslim. I am also Bangladeshi” (Hassan)

Their identities are fluid. West (1995: 15) argues:

“because we all have multiple positions in terms of constructing our identities; there’s no such thing as having one identity or of there being one essential identity that fundamentally defines who we actually are”.

Identity is therefore *“multifaceted and variable and is in a constant state of flux and can never be static”* (Kershen, 1998: 2, 19). Their identities transcend geographical and political boundaries. People’s subjective perceptions of where they belong cannot be defined by legal or situational citizenship governed by the nation-state. The issues of identity, self-awareness and conceptions of community and home are far more complex in character. Gardner (1995: 5) captures the complex situation that many British born Bangladeshis find themselves in. Gardner argues that due to the complex perceptions of ‘home’, many British Bangladeshis may have entered a *“state of permanent exile where nowhere is truly home”*. Hassan, Ashraf and Iqbal, it can be argued, have become part of what Hannerz (1992: 261) has described as a *“creole world”* or constitute Glick Schiller and Fouron’s (2001: 7) *“transborder state”* where lives, aspirations and identities are no longer conventionally bound or determined by space.

4.3 A distrust of the ‘Whiteman’: Living through racism

“[we all] have black hair and their mums and dads look like my mum and dad. We are the same to us and definitely different to them... from the way we look to the way and what we eat” (Iqbal)

These words from Iqbal highlight the importance of ‘community’ and ‘ethnicity’. It is argued that such words resonate from years of racist discrimination which has heightened the notion of ‘difference’ and also installed a defiant message of ‘us’ vs ‘them’.

The experiences of the three respondents suggests that the *“problem of the colour line”* (Du Bois, 1989[1903]) remains a contemporary issue which locates them within a social and

political position of inferiority and thus directs their identities which is both imposed and non-negotiable (Bulmer and Solomos, 1999: 3; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004: 27). Whilst recent analysis of race as a barrier to full societal membership and participation has moved away from the skin colour issue to a form of ‘new racism’ (Barker, 1981) based on differences in culture, race as a live theme was evident within the voices of the three respondents. There was a constant distinction between themselves and the “*white man*” throughout our conversations. This distrust of the “*white man*”, however, must be located within the localised rich history of racism and racial violence that Bangladeshis have endured since mass immigration in post war Britain (Mumford & Power, 2003; Jorda, 1978; Mackinnon, 1993).

All three respondents were disillusioned by the way they were treated by non-Bangladeshis and had developed a rhetoric of ‘them’ vs ‘us’. All three had experienced direct racism such as being called a “*paki*”. Ashraf recalls an incident when he was “*chased by some whiteboys as [he] was playing in the park... [his] brother was also beaten up once and [his] father was told to go back home*”. As such, I argue that they were looking at themselves through the eyes of the ‘white’ other – a form of double consciousness (Du Bois (1989[1903]: 5). As Smith (1986: 41) reminds us, awareness of ethnic group consciousness becomes “*crystallised*” when exposed to the durability and the ubiquitous presence and longevity of other ethnic communities. As Kershen (1998: 2) puts it, “*without an ‘other’ to identify with or differ from, self-recognition would be impossible*”.

To this extent, the racialised ‘othering’ process that Iqbal, Hassan and Ashraf have experienced, argues Mandair (2005: 2), is something which occurs “*automatically*” and is simply a “*repetition of the colonial event*” entrenched in power relations (Mannoni, 1964;

Fanon, 1967; Said, 1979). I argue that for many, looking ‘different’ from the majority of British society has excluded them from mainstream society and denied them access to power and in the process it has also gripped and strengthened their sense of ethnic and racial group identity. Also, large scale community events such as Friday prayers and the wearing of the traditional dress during the Eid festival are rituals and commonalities that bind them together and reinforce a sense of ‘community’.

Butler (1993: 22) argues that all identities operate through exclusion, through the discursive construction of a constitutive outside which leads to the production of marginalised subjects who are outside of the symbolic and the represented. This leads to a domain, a space which is essentially ‘outside’ of the mainstream. As Bauman (1996: 19) further comments, it is this uncertainty that has led to the cementing of certain identities, *“one thinks of identity whenever one is not sure of where one belongs... identity is the name given to the escape sought from that uncertainty”*.

The awareness of themselves as a racial and cultural community is important to the whole identity question for the third generation Bangladeshis. It is my argument that the many *“racisms”* (Goldberg, 1993: 97-111) and racist actions in whatever guise (overt, subtle, cultural, symbolic, institutional) lie at the core feelings of rejection, powerlessness and exclusion that many third generation Bangladeshis experience. Racism as an ideology of racial domination of one group over another is rooted in the belief that a designated racial group is either biologically or culturally inferior which in turn rationalises the inferior group’s treatment and social position in society (Wilson, 1973). Consequently, many are resisting the dominant hegemony and fighting for social and economic justice. It is through

this process of contest, protest and dissent, that the “*problematic of identity*” takes shape (Kearney, 2003: 52).

4.4 Bangladeshi or British ? Or both ?

Along with notions of community, identity and race, the concept of ‘Britishness’ and a national identity was also a reoccurring theme throughout the conversations with Iqbal, Hassan and Ashraf. Despite exclusion from mainstream British society alongside a racialised line, all three had an overtly British-Western lifestyle. For example, they all spoke English, dressed in Western clothes and engaged in common Western social activities such as cinema trips and eating out with friends.

Their complex and fluid notion of ‘self’ (Giddens, 1991; Kearney, 2003:47) was evident when I queried what identity category best described them. Ashraf and Iqbal exerted a hyphenated identity (Lahiri, 2006; Zwick, 2002) - ‘Bengali-British’. Hassan used the term “*Muslim*” to describe himself. When asked why they did not feel fully British despite being born here and having a British lifestyle, all three respondents thought that they would never be considered British/ English because they were “*different*”. Different because they “*looked*” different and because they “*weren’t like white mans*”(Ashraf). This echoes Bauman’s (1996: 19) observation in that the issue of “*identity comes to the fore when there are doubts about belonging*”. Furthermore, they were not part of the British nation as they were not “*culturally homogenised*” with the rest of the population and also were not, as Guibernau and Rex (1997: 4-5) claim, members of a nation-state as they did not have, “*a common culture and a sense of belonging to its members*”. It was clear also that all three respondents associated ‘whiteness’ with being British.

Due to the fluidity and complexity of their identity, and their non acceptance as either Bangladeshi or British, I argue that many third generation Bangladeshis are constructing a new identity (Br-Islam) for themselves. Br-Islam allows many third generation Bangladeshis to *be* British. It is the idea of Britishness as a concept which positively embraces cultural diversity (Alibhai-Brown, 2000; Parekh, 2000a) which I subscribe to and not the narrow racialised version of Britishness presented as closed and exclusive by historic figureheads such as Enoch Powell.

British historian Paul Ward (2004) argues that a British national identity needs to become disassociated from the colonial legacy of white supremacy and become more plural and inclusive of minority cultures. A ‘critical’ multiculturalism (McLaren, 1994; Walzer, 1994; Lott, 1994) as a means of resisting monoculturalism and cultural hegemony must become a core value of what it means to be British. Using Wards (2004: 138) terminology, it can be argued that Br-Islam is therefore a “*different kind of British*” as it fuses the many facets of third generation Bangladeshi identities together and promotes a plural Britishness.

4.5 The role of religion: the development of ‘Br-Islam’

This section of the chapter examines the role of the religion of Islam on the lives of the three respondents. There are many anthropological (Geertz, 2000) and sociological (Akhtar, 2005) explanations as to why Islam has increased in national and global popularity. Not only does it provide a sense of history, stability and belonging (Saeed et al, 1999: 826, 830), I argue that Islam also provides its followers with a sense of universal and ‘imagined’ (Anderson, 1983) brother and sisterhood. The modern, progressive and fashionable Br-Islam practiced by many third generation Bangladeshis also counters localised socio-political issues of marginalisation

and exclusion by providing visibility and confidence. Br-Islam, as a dynamic movement, is discussed in greater depth in chapter eight of this thesis.

The religion of Islam played an important role in shaping the identities of Hassan, Ashraf and Iqbal. In particular, Hassan wanted to distance himself away from Bangladeshi culture through Islam. The role of Islam in providing an alternative space for young Bangladeshis to exert their identity is not a novel development and has been examined by several commentators (Eade, 1998: 136-159; Hoque, 2004c). What is novel is the fusion of a British, Bangladeshi and Islamic identity (Br-Islam) amongst many third generation Bangladeshis in contemporary society as a tool to manage their identity riddle. All three were constructing “*new ethnicities*” (Alexander, 2005: 2) for themselves. All three respondents observed the religion of Islam mainly by attending their local mosques on a weekly basis. All three echoed the importance of being a Muslim, but it was Hassan who was the more devout out of the three.

Hassan was very conservative in his interpretation of Islam whilst Iqbal and Ashraf were connected to Islam culturally and ideologically and not necessarily by practice (Sahin, 2005). Islam provided Hassan with a “*sense of purpose away from the hedonistic Western way of life which has no inner peace or no goals*”. Taking note of Ansari’s (2004: 19) comments of young British Muslims provides an insight as to why many young Bangladeshis such as Hassan are keen to exert their religious identities over others:

“by relinquishing their ethnic identification, [young British Muslims] have tried to counter their definition by the indigenous population as being from somewhere else, while by adopting a Muslim identification they have challenged traditional notions of Britishness. This kind of self-consciousness helps young British Muslims to cope with the ambiguities and contradictions they experience in British society”

In this respect, the construction of a Br-Islamic space may be viewed as a positive development as it provides the “*kind of self-consciousness*” that helps many young British Muslims to cope with the “*ambiguities and contradictions they experience in British society*”. I argue that Br-Islam also acts as a rebellious identity and the indicators of religiosity amongst the global Muslim community such as the headscarf and beards have re-emerged both as a symbol of devotion to Islam but also as a distaste for and opposition to political and cultural establishments (Kamrava, 2006:5).

4.6 Conclusion(s) of pilot study

The pilot study of this research answered some of the initial research questions posed in the introduction of this thesis. The pilot study also enabled me to reach certain conclusions about the experiences of third generation Bangladeshis from East London. In addition, it enabled me to crystallise areas of further investigation as part of the main body of field research.

For example, I realised through the pilot study that despite the Bangla language being central to Bangladeshi national identity (Choudhury, 1974), all three of the participants spoke to me in English throughout the interviews (apart from a few slang words in Sylheti-Bangla and Arabic). Unlike their grandparents and many of their parents, Hassan, Ashraf and Iqbal were not part of a Bengali speaking linguistic community. I wanted to know if the third generation Bangladeshis understood the complex and important relationship between the Bangla language and identity, or if they had found a replacement for the Bangla language. Therefore, to investigate further, I decided to focus on the theme of language as one of the components of identity during the semi-structured interviews with the six main participants of this study.

Also, although it gave me a ‘snapshot’ and an insight into the various components of third generation Bangladeshi identity, I realised that the thirty minutes that I set aside for the individual interviews was not long enough to explore the complexity of identity and capture the stories of childhood, schooling and family, amongst others. The time constraint was mainly governed by the availability of the three participants as it coincided with their end of year exams. Therefore, I decided that I was not going to put any time constraints at all during the series of interviews with the six main participants of this study. I wanted to provide them with the space and time to discuss deep areas of individual and collective identity.

Much of the life stories of the three respondents (Hassan, Ashraf and Iqbal) from the pilot study mirrors my own experiences of growing up in East London. For example, the feeling of second-class citizenship because of my racialised minority status in Britain. This issue has brought into question notions of home, community and a British national identity and whether I am part of what it means to be ‘British’.

New factors have also emerged which have not featured much in my own autobiographical chapter. For example, although religious Arabic education was a key part of my childhood, this did not manifest itself into a religiously rooted socio-political identity. The geo-political world of today is different to the world in which my childhood years were spent in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Whilst there was evidence of a global Islamic identity emerging triggered of by events such as the Salman Rushdie book burning protests of 1989 and the Gulf War of 1990, the contemporary world is a place where the religion of Islam has become a hotly disputed and controversial element of socio-political life especially in Western Europe. The active role of religion and the subsequent Br-Islam that has emerged as a new

form of identity for many third generation Bangladeshis did not play a major role in my own upbringing.

Membership to Br-Islam allows them to negotiate and manage the complexities of being *Bangladeshi, British and Muslim* in a complex technological global society and it is within this dynamic new identity where many have found a sense of acceptance, visibility and belonging.

Using the findings from the pilot study as a template, the following chapter presents the data and examines the themes from the main body of field research involving six third generation Bangladeshis from East London. The three main components of third generation Bangladeshi identity that the pilot study highlighted were:

- Racial identity
- Religious identity
- National identity

A specific Bangladeshi female gendered identity was also considered during the main field research as three out of the six participants were female. A linguistic identity was also considered for the reasons highlighted above. These five core themes helped guide the ‘semi’ structure of the interviews. The data from the main field research is then analysed in part three of this thesis where much of the literature, concepts, theories and arguments discussed in this chapter is re-visited, debated and critiqued in greater detail.

Part Two

Introduction of Participants and Key Themes

Chapter 5

Introduction of Participants and Key Themes

5.0 Introduction

The series of interviews with the six participants (three male and three female) needed for the main body of the study adhered to the narrative approach to research as outlined in chapter three. All of the first and follow up interviews took place between March 2006 and July 2008. The follow up interviews allowed me to take the correspondence of the previous interviews back to the researched and engage in further dialogue (Riessman, 1993). All six participants nominated themselves through my youth work contacts in Tower Hamlets. The locations for the interviews varied between youth club settings, cafes, college canteens, family homes, community centres, training centres and public parks. The interviews all followed a semi-structured format and were predominantly conversational in tone (Ellen, 1984). All of the interviews were concerned with qualitative life stories of the respondents and their experiences. The central question of ‘identity’ guided the interviews. Retelling stories and recalling memory is a difficult skill (Ellen, 1984). These interviews brought out these skills within the participants.

Upon establishing some basic information about the participants such as name, address, gender, DOB, the chronological order in which the semi-structured nature of the interviews took shape were as follows:

1. A bit about themselves (likes, dislikes, hobbies) – *to establish rapport*

2. Childhood memories
3. Area of residence
4. Family life
5. Schooling
6. Social life/ peer groups
7. Culture and community
8. The 'who am I' identity question ?
9. Birthplace and homeland
10. Future aspirations

The core research questions (as stated in the introduction of this thesis) centred around five key components of identity (language, race, religion, nationality, gender/ female). These themes guided the interviews. These key components of identity were informed by both the research focus of this study as well as the findings from the pilot study outlined in the previous chapter.

I was subtle in my questioning. For example, whilst not directly asking whether they experienced racism growing up in Tower Hamlets ?, I asked instead, questions about their early childhood, schooling and peer groups (refer to list above) in the hope that they themselves would volunteer information of whether or not racism was an issue for them. I, then, as the researcher had the time consuming job of transcribing their interviews in order to analyse and extract any data which highlighted whether or not 'race' was an important identity marker for the participants¹⁹. Within these broader semi-structured themes, however, there were many sub-themes and patterns²⁰ that emerged from the interview data which connected the participants in terms of history, experience and future aspirations. There were also examples which distinguished the experiences of the participants, what Silverman (2005)

¹⁹ Refer to [Appendix 5](#) for an example of such data analysis

²⁰ Refer to [Appendix 4](#) and [Appendix 6](#) for a full comprehensive list of colour coded sub-themes

and others (Mehan, 1979) have referred to as ‘deviant’ cases. These areas of similarity of experience as well as divergence amongst the six participants are discussed in detail in this chapter.

This chapter is divided into five sections:

- The first section outlines some of the key principles adhered to throughout the research process;
- The second section introduces the six main participants of this study;
- The third part outlines how I collected, coded and analysed the data;
- The fourth part presents some of the key data from the interviews and illuminates any patterns and themes that connect the respondents together;
- The conclusion outlines five main schools of thought that have emerged from the interviews which are analysed in depth in the following chapters of this thesis (part three).

5.1 Key principles adhered to throughout the research process

As discussed in the methodology chapter, the narrative approach to research revolves around the central concepts of rapport (Berg, 1989; Bogdan & Taylor, 1975), authenticity, collaboration (Silverman, 2005) and ‘trustworthiness’ (Alasuutari, 1995: 47; Riessman, 1993). Therefore, the following principles were considered throughout the interviews in order to establish rapport and allow for collaborative conversation to occur:

Table 2: Key principles adhered to throughout the research process

- An information letter outlining the aims and objectives behind the PhD and also my personal reasons for the research was given out to all participants before any interviews took place. A consent letter was given to the parents of the participants under the age of sixteen (refer to appendices 2 & 3);
- In common with many other studies, the criteria for selection of those to be interviewed depended, in part, on pragmatic considerations such as availability and the willingness to be interviewed (Cohen & Manion, 1994; Bell, 1987). Issues such as convenience, accessibility, reciprocity and goodwill, therefore, were important considerations throughout the interview process (Bell, 1987);
- All of the respondents were asked about their rationale for getting involved and what they thought that the research was about;
- The initial stages of the interviews were spent defining certain important terms associated with the research such as ‘third generation’, ‘community’, ‘identity’;
- Sometimes I had to guide the participants and prompt (Goldthorpe et al, 1968; DeVault, 1991) them towards areas and themes that I would like covered in the interviews mindful always of not influencing their thoughts. I remained vague in my introduction. I said that I was interested in finding out about their life stories, childhood experiences growing up in East London and their future ambitions. This was deliberate and intentional as I was careful not to influence their responses around my research agenda and also careful not to introduce words to them;
- All of the interviews were recorded on my iPod. This gadget was reliable and non-intrusive during the interviews. There were two main benefits to recording the interviews. Firstly, it can be transcribed and examined in detail and secondly, it can be replayed and studied repeatedly (Sacks, 1992, Vol 1);
- I had social conversations (within professional boundaries) before the start of the interviews with the six participants. This was intended to act as ice-breakers and to also set the scene. This process allowed me to decide upon the language, codes and depth that the interview was to be conducted in (Fabian, 1979; Junker, 1960). To this end, the interviews were viewed as a “*social process*” (Ellen, 1984: 230);
- I was always mindful that the interviews were a ‘voluntary’ arrangement and that the six participants were self-nominated. The respondents had nothing to gain apart from the fact that they were interested in the subject areas;

Table 2 (continued):

- As the respondents were young, I took factors such as concentration spans, child protection issues and wording into consideration during the interviews. Some were agitated during the interviews and were at first shy and reserved. Rapport was established by a discussion of trivial popular culture;
- Their comfort level throughout the interviews was paramount. Therefore the interviews were conducted in areas where they were familiar with and felt comfortable and relaxed (Byrne, 2004). Interviews were also conducted around the schedules of the participants which is considered as good practice by many commentators in the field of youth work (Hoque, 2004a; Hoque, 2004b) as it helps establish a relationship based on trust;
- The initial stages of two of the first interviews (with Zeyba and Taiba) were conducted amongst friends and family members since the issue of gaining confidence in order to collect data took precedence over issues of privacy. When friends and family members were present, they were helpful in prompting the memories of the respondents, providing context to some of the answers and filling in blanks;
- All of the interviews were conducted in English although there were times when Bengali words were used interchangeably within the conversation;
- There were some examples of profane and vulgar language being used by the participants to express certain feelings and emotions. I have deliberately left such phrases in the main body of this study as I feel that such words were important in describing the mood and point of view of the participants. I have tried to remain true to their ‘stories’ and also consider important issues of accuracy and authenticity;
- I did not set any time limits to the interviews. The shortest initial interview was one hour and the longest was two hours. The conversations flowed as I knew that the follow up interview would allow me to pursue further lines of research not covered during the initial interview;
- Unless absolutely necessary, I allowed the participants to do most of the talking. There was minimal interruption from me, allowing the respondents to structure their own accounts. My main job was to listen and observe (Byrne, 2004; Thompson, 1988) and have a conversation with the above themes in mind although I do recognise that in practice, no matter how hard I tried to diminish my presence in the interview exchange, interactional and interpretive “*activity*” is a hallmark of all interviews (Gubrium & Holstein, 2004: 140);
- As much as possible, my body language was always positive. I tried to establish a positive atmosphere by smiling and maintaining eye contact.

5.2 Background of the Six Respondents

This section of the chapter introduces the six main participants of this study and also outlines some background history of all six respondents. All of the respondents were Bangladeshi, of secondary school/ college age (15-19), were willing to be interviewed in great depth, lived in Tower Hamlets and were British born. The real names and locations of the six respondents have been altered to protect the identities of the participants.

Saeed Miah, male aged 19, from Poplar, London E14

Saeed is a third generation Bangladeshi from Poplar, Tower Hamlets. Saeed has one brother and one sister and lives with his mother and father in a council estate. They are a very tight-knit family. His father is unemployed and his mother is a full time housewife. His father was brought over to the UK from Sylhet (Bangladesh) at the age of eleven by his grandfather in the late 1970s. Saeed enjoys “*cotching* (socialising) *with his boys.. smoking shisha* (flavoured tobacco)... *and eating biryani* (flavoured rice) *and chops*” and playing football.

Saeed has had a very troubled education. Constantly being “*kicked out*” of the classroom during his secondary education, Saeed was eventually referred to the Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) at the age of fourteen. He did not get along with his teachers and was “*bored*” of school. As a result he does not have a positive view of education although he is proud of his older sister who is studying medicine at university. “*She is the clever one in the family [pause] she is the one who will bring us a good reputation*”, suggests Saeed. This reiterates the dual importance of education and ‘reputation’ within many Bangladeshi families. Since being referred to the PRU, Saeed has been in constant trouble with the police, having being

cautioned and also imprisoned for what he refers to as “*stupid trouble*”. Saeed’s early memories of childhood revolve around the estate bound football pitch and gang fights. He remembers vividly the “*older boys*” fighting nearly every week with knives and machetes. He has a very negative view of the police:

“I am always stopped and searched by the police. Its mainly because of the way I look and dress..”

His distrust of authority (teachers, police, politicians) is evident throughout our conversation. Although very resentful, angry and frustrated, he is remarkably mature for his age. This, he attributes to his street education, having to do “*things on my own*” and also having always “*hung around the older boys in my area*”. Saeed has ambitions of owning his own business in the future and he hopes volunteering in business industries will give him the knowledge and insight to succeed in his ambition.

Akbar Miah, male aged 19, from Shadwell, London E1

Akbar Miah is a third generation Bangladeshi from Shadwell, Tower Hamlets. He has recently moved with his family to the neighbouring borough of Newham. At the time of interviewing, he was studying his A Levels at college and hoped to go onto university to pursue a career in business. His father died when Akbar was only three and he now lives with his mother and two brothers. He is extremely close to his mother and his life experiences and values have been heavily shaped by her. He plays a “*lot of football*” and likes watching television. He also likes to “*hang out*” with his friends and reads tabloid newspapers (The Metro). He is an Arsenal fan and works part time in Arsenal Football Club in the hospitality kiosk.

Azad Miah, male aged 18, from Bow, London E3

Azad is a third generation Bangladeshi from Bow, Tower Hamlets. Azad is the eldest of three siblings. He lives in a three generational family household with his grandparents. Azad is the only respondent out of the six who has never visited Bangladesh. This, perhaps, explains his pessimism towards the Bengali language and culture. At the time of interviewing, Azad was studying for his A Levels at college and hoped to go onto university to study accounts and finance. He would someday like to leave Bow and live in a more ‘multicultural’ area where there is “*more interaction with people from other cultures and communities*”. Azad is a keen sportsperson and likes to read fictional crime novels during his spare time. His favourite author is Dan Brown. He also likes “*hanging around with his mates*”. Azad went to a Madrasha (Islamic School) as part of his secondary education.

Sanjida Begum, female aged 16, from Bethnal Green, London E2

Sanjida Begum is a third generation Bangladeshi from Bethnal Green, Tower Hamlets. She was born in Whitechapel, Tower Hamlets however due to family expansion she moved to Forest Gate and then onto Bethnal Green in 2000. She attended a secondary school which had a diverse student population although the predominant ethnic culture within the school was White/ British whom Sanjida refers to as “*white people*”. Sanjida’s grandfather came to the United Kingdom in 1960 and she now lives with her mother and father, her three sisters and her twin brothers in a four bedroom council flat. She is the eldest sibling. Her father is a machinist and her mother teaches Bengali part time at an after school club. Sanjida has been

to Bangladesh twice in her lifetime (1999, 2003) and has a close connection with her “*motherland*”.

Sanjida likes “*hanging out with her friends*”, watching documentaries on the Discovery Channel, going to the cinema and eating out at Nandos restaurant. At the time of interviewing, Sanjida was about to go to college and hoped to go onto university and study for a PGCE and become a teacher.

Zeyba Hussain, female aged 15, from Mile End, London E1

Zeyba is a third generation Bangladeshi from Mile End, Tower Hamlets. She has four sisters and lives with her mum and dad in a freehold house. Her father works for the local authority and her older sisters are all university graduates whose professions range from being a doctor, teacher and a banker. Her mother is a full time housewife. There is a huge emphasis on education within Zeyba’s family and she is given the support, resources, space and tuition to succeed in her education. Zeyba is also expected to follow in her sisters footsteps and enter into a similar profession. According to Bourdieu (1994), Zeyba has the “*habitus*” (lifestyle and values) to succeed in the education system. Through education, Zeyba’s family have undergone a dual process of upward social mobility (Giddens, 1973) as well as ‘intergenerational’ mobility (Roberts, 2001) as her father’s nonmanual profession is different to her grandfather who was an unskilled manual worker (Goldthorpe, 1987).

In contrast to the other five participants, it is argued that Zeyba’s family are firmly rooted within the middle class in terms of values, assets, income and profession (Giddens, 1973; Savage et al, 1992; Wynne, 1998; Bourdieu, 1994). However, despite a high level of education and a liberal upbringing, Zeyba’s family are paradoxically still firmly rooted within

Bangladeshi culture and are guided by Islamic principles. For example, two of her elder sisters had an arranged marriage and also wear the headscarf and Zeyba attends after school Islamic classes.

Socially, Zeyba enjoys travelling, reading books, going to ‘womens only’ karate classes and spending time with her family.

Taiba Khatun, female aged 17, from Poplar, London E14

Taiba is a third generation Bangladeshi from Poplar, Tower Hamlets. She is the eldest sibling of three. Her father was brought over to the UK by her late grandfather in the 1970s. Taiba has lived a traumatic life. Her mother suffered domestic violence at the hands of her gambling and alcoholic father. During one incident when her father put a knife to her mother’s throat, Taiba called the police and a legal investigation followed. Despite this incident, Taiba’s mother did not press charges and blamed Taiba for getting outside authorities involved. In Taiba’s words, she became the “*black sheep of the family*”. Taiba became ostracised from the rest of her family and soon became a consistent runaway. She also started to self harm and overdose as a “*cry for help*” and eventually started to hang around with the “*wrong crowd*”. She has now left home and lives in a woman’s refuge and has lost all contact with her family. At the time of interviewing, Taiba was pregnant and her boyfriend was in prison for attempted robbery. Her parents are unaware of her pregnancy and Taiba has asked the local imam (a Muslim priest) to act as a mediator and break this news to her parents. Despite her history, her ‘family’ and her ‘religion’ remain important to Taiba.

Like all of the other five participants, Taiba spoke to me candidly about her family history, childhood memories, her views of Bangladeshi culture and her aspirations.

5.3 Presenting and coding the data: Common themes, sub-themes and patterns that connect the respondents together

5.3(i) The five stages of data collection and analysis

The data collection and subsequent data analysis of the interviews with Sanjida, Taiba, Zeyba, Akbar, Saeed and Azad underwent multiple levels of analysis and was underpinned by a five stage chronology of events:

Stage One

Although I started this thesis with my own research questions (refer to introductory and autobiographical chapter), the questionnaire with 103 pupils from Stepney Green School (November 2004) and the pilot study with Iqbal, Ashraf and Hassan (June 2005) enabled me to crystallise and refine the main themes, focus and research questions for the main study.

Stage Two

With the five themes in mind, I asked open ended chronological questions about the participants lives (refer to section 5.0). I listened to their life stories and transcribed the first set of interviews. At this moment, I realised that the data was complex, often contradictory and continuously overlapping. This was, however, in keeping with the fluidity and messy nature of identity that I was trying to capture through the interviews. Searching for the patterns that ‘connected’ the participants, I realised that many reoccurring sub-themes were

emerging from the data. I decided to colour code the themes and code the most consistent sub themes (refer to tables below) in an attempt to categorise the data.²¹

It is acknowledged, however, that by imposing my own conceptual thinking and certain categories on the data collection, I may have deflected attention away from ‘other’ categories that may have been important to the identities of the six participants (Atkinson, 1992). I am aware that the coding, categorizing and typologising of narratives can result in telling parts of stories, rather than presenting them in their “*wholeness*” (Miller & Glassner, 2004: 127). I also acknowledge that it is very difficult to quantify qualitative data. However, as the research progressed, the coding and categorizing of the large volumes of data became a useful organisational tool during the subsequent data analysis stage. It also enabled me to ‘make sense’ of the overlapping stories.

Stage Three

The third stage involved going back to the participants as part of the ‘follow up’ interviews. This enabled me to probe further areas of contradiction and confusion arising from the data analysis of the first interview. These interviews were also transcribed and colour coded under thematic headings. The presentation of data both below and in part three of this study does not make a distinction between the findings of the first and ‘follow up’ interviews. I viewed both sets of interviews as part of one overall fluid process.

Stage Four

The fourth stage involved the analysis of the narratives (data) under five separate components of identity – *linguistic, racial, religious, national and gender/ female* (refer to chapters six –

²¹ Refer to appendix 4 which highlights some of the reasons why I decided **against** using computer assisted software programmes (CAQDAS) in analysing and coding the transcripts from the interviews

ten). It is acknowledged that it is impossible to capture the dynamism of identity and life-stories under one singular heading. There is much overlap and complexity among the various components of human identity. Therefore, there is some cross-examination, fluidity and repetition between the five data analysis chapters in part three of this thesis.

Stage Five

Finally, the narratives from the six participants were purposefully analysed within the context of the wider theory and literature available relating to the five components of identity mentioned above. My rationale for this was guided by two factors.

Firstly, it is important to note that the data analysed in part three of this study was not extracted to fit around the wider literature available on the various components of their identities. Rather, the literature was used selectively to either substantiate or engage critically with the voices and stories of the six participants of this study. I also wanted to provide context and locate the voices (data) within historical and contemporary debate.

Secondly, the literature review chapter (4) was deliberately kept ‘thin’ in terms of analysis and critical vigour. The main purpose was to locate the narratives of the three participants from the pilot study within the wider theory available on the subject matters and also, to introduce to the reader some of the key studies and literature concerning racial, national and religious identities. In adhering to Wolcott’s (1990: 17) advice, I did not want to “lump” all of the relevant literature into one chapter that remained “*unconnected*” to the rest of the thesis. Rather, I viewed both the literature review and the data analysis as an interwoven ongoing process throughout the *whole* study. I wanted to draw upon the literature selectively, critically and appropriately as needed in the “*telling of their stor[ies]*” . This reciprocal

relationship between theory and data is further echoed by Coffey and Atkinson (1996: 153) who argue that “*data collection and data analysis do not make sense when treated in an intellectual vacuum and divorced from more general and fundamental disciplinary frameworks*”. By engaging in such a reflexive process, I was able to utilise appropriate literature as and when I needed it especially during the course of data analysis in part three of this study.

It is acknowledged that there were some themes that emerged from the interviews that have been largely neglected below. For example, the role of modern technology in shaping the identities of some of the participants, the ‘mixing’ of languages in creating new ones and the emergence of traditional patriarchy among some younger generation of Bangladeshi men. Whilst these are important components of ‘their’ stories and hence ‘their’ identities, they were more individualised and therefore relevant and specific to only a few of the participants. These elements of identity, I feel, present opportunities for future ethnographic research. One of the key objectives guiding the interviews was to illuminate the common themes and patterns that connected the participants together. Therefore, the data presented below has been extracted due to its consistency and commonality amongst all six participants.

5.3(ii) Colour coding the themes and sub-themes

As discussed above, thematic colours and codes of the sub-themes were applied to the transcripts of all of the interviews with the six respondents in my attempt to analyse and understand ‘their’ stories. Appendix 5 is a short example of how the interviews were transcribed and analysed according to colour and coding.

The data from the interviews with the six participants was colour coded (in no particular order) into five main categories:

1. Language

2. Race

3. Religion

4. Nationality

5. Gender (Bangladeshi female)

The sub-themes that emerged within these five components of identity were:

LANGUAGE (L)

Abbreviated Code	Sub-theme
L – BLPC	Bengali as a language of practical communication
L – ECL	English as a commercial language important for progress and modernity
L – BLCI	Bengali as a language of history, heritage, culture and identity
L – CA	Emergence of new colloquial Arabic in everyday language

RACE (R)

Abbreviated Code	Sub-theme
R – CR	Experience of early childhood racism
R – WM	A stereotypical view of the ‘white man’
R – RS	A racially segregated East London leading to lack of interaction with other communities
R – SC	Skin colour marks them out as ‘different’. Skin colour presented as a barrier to societal participation
R – OTH	Bengali and Islamic culture presented as the ‘other’

RELIGION (RL)

Abbreviated Code	Sub-theme
RL – ISS	Islam as a social and spiritual force
RL – IPI	Islam as a political identity leading to victim mentality
RL – ICI	Islam as a cultural identity
RL – IHI	Islam as a hyphenated-identity

RL – II	Islam as a ‘core’ identity
RL – UvsT	Muslim ‘us’ vs non-Muslim ‘them’ polarisation of society
RL – ID	Islamic identity through dress
RL – IGL	Islam as a global identity
RL – BrI	Islam as a modern, trendy and Westernised identity (Br-Islam)
RL – IBC	Islam becoming more important than Bangladeshi culture
RL – NR	Experience of new racisms (Islamophobia)

NATIONALITY (N)

Abbreviated Code	Sub-theme
N – BB	‘British’ by virtue of birthright
N – LB	Legal right to be ‘British’
N – BBI	A multifaceted ‘British/ Bangladeshi’ identity
N – BrC	A fluid and contested ‘Britishness’
N – GENB	A generalisation of ‘Britishness’
N – EW	Englishness as associated with ‘whiteness’
N – CH	A fuzzy and complex notion of ‘home’: Britain is home but also sense of displacement due to ‘different’ culture and skin colour. Bangladesh is “hot”, full of “mosquitoes”. No fixed sense of ‘home’
N – HBR	‘Home’ as equated with family, familiarity and place of birth
N – CCBEL	Sense of ‘community’ and ‘connection’ with fellow Bangladeshis in East London
N – DBC	Disconnect from Bangladeshi culture and Bangladesh as a country. Bangladesh viewed as a place of “holiday” and Bangladeshis viewing the respondents as “tourists”
N – HCM	‘Home’ having a close relationship with childhood memories
N – BM	Deep connection with Bangladesh (the “motherland”)

GENDER (Bangladeshi female) (GBF)

Abbreviated Code	Sub-theme
GBF – GBG	Notion of the “good Bangladeshi girl” (somebody who is quiet, religious, domesticated, studious, respects her parents and is concerned about family name and reputation) still wielding importance
GBF – CGBG	Challenging and resisting the notion of the “good Bangladeshi girl”
GBF – I+	Impact of Islam as a force for change
GBF – MMH	Multiple meanings of ‘hijab’/ covering
GBF – HP	Hijab as a symbol of politicisation
GBF – HS	Hijab as a symbol of spirituality
GBF – HB	Hijab as a symbol of trendiness/ modernity/ fashion – “hijabi Barbie”
GBF – EC	The importance of education and career

The remainder of this chapter presents some of the key data from the interviews with the participants of this study. The data below highlights the multifaceted, contradictory and competing identities of the six participants. This complexity is captured in some of the

narratives below through the usage of different colours *within* the same data extract. Selected narratives are colour coded below in order to illustrate how I have ‘made sense’ (coded, categorised and analysed) of ‘their’ stories. Furthermore, I use a great deal of short and lengthy quotations from the participants to reveal the complexity of the patterns that connect them and to also illustrate the complex development of a Br-Islamic identity (the main argument of this study)²². In doing so, I hope that I have faithfully represented the six individuals of this study.

5.3(1) The disconnect from Bengali Culture

Culture as a concept and as a “*way of life*” (Inglis, 2005) emerged consistently throughout all of the interviews. Many of the participants ridiculed and criticised the Bangladeshi culture. Taiba’s resistance towards the Bangladeshi culture has been informed both by the actions of her grandmother whom she refers to as the “*wicked witch*” and also by the strict regulations of being a ‘female’ within a largely Bangladeshi community. There is a famous Bangladeshi proverb which suggests that “*when you live in the water, you don’t argue with the crocodiles*” (White, 1992). Although White’s (1992) anthropological study mainly focused on illiterate rural Bangladeshi women, this proverb, nonetheless, highlights the importance of power and power relations between women and men (the “*crocodiles*”) as a key feature of Bangladeshi culture. However, this study argues that whilst some younger third generation Bangladeshi girls are reinforcing such power relations within a patriarchal framework (Sanjida), there are equally a group of women who are contesting the image of the passive and subordinate woman (Taiba).

²² Refer to appendix 8

Taiba's grandmother, was "too cultural" and was the enforcer of the cultural values and practices within her household. When probed further, a clear image of Bangladeshi culture for Taiba emerges:

"We had no option but to get A in our schoolwork. Anything less was seen as a failure (GBF-GBG). I had to either wear the scarf, hijab or burka. My father forced me to wear the scarf as it supposedly made me look more respectable (RL-ID). I was not allowed to play outside with my friends and had to be straight home after school. I had to pray five times a day and as a girl, I was expected to cook and clean around the house. I also could not have any interaction with boys and was also expected to marry one of my cousin brothers (relative) from Bangladesh. This strictness was not just applicable to me as a girl. My brother was also not allowed to go out (GBF-GBG)"*

Sanjida also echoes this notion of a gendered Bangladeshi culture although her experience is more a result of her being the eldest sibling:

"as the eldest, I have to set an example to the rest of my brothers and sisters... this is pressure... I have to help around a bit more.... not cooking, but probably the cleaning and the ironing... when everyone gets together, its like 'Sanjida look after the baby' ... in a way its alright, but sometimes I think, oh my god, do I have to be the oldest ?"

It is also evident that the role of food and dress, namely the saree, are also important elements of Bangladeshi culture for Sanjida:

"I like the clothing as long as it is not tatty. Sometimes we talk about if my aunty was to get married, what would we wear, and I turn around and say I want to wear a saree. I love the colour and glamour of the saree Also, food is important to Bangladeshi culture. I love the meat and potato thing and the chicken... and err, what else, samosas, I love those.. tandoori, pilau rice... the food is fine"

Coming from a patriarchal male perspective, Saeed's discussion of Bangladeshi culture is more simplistic:

"work, support family, wanting kids to go onto good paths, get married and... rice and curry"

It is clear that the 'family', 'food', 'dress', 'reputation', 'education' and 'career' seem to be overlapping factors in the discussion of Bangladeshi culture. Like most parents from all

different communities and cultures, many Bangladeshi parents want their children to gain a high level of education and enter into a profession. As Zeyba suggests:

“my dad is really concerned about my school work. He wants me to be a doctor or something like my sisters... he thinks that’s amazing for Bangladeshis (GBF-EC)”

Local area studies (Phillipson, 2003) have shown that Bangladeshi parents generally want to build a better future for their children. However due to a multitude of socio-economic factors discussed earlier in chapter two (lack of role models, overcrowded households, poor schooling, poverty, material deprivation) many second generation Bangladeshi parents have been unable to pass down this culture of ‘education’ down to their children. Akbar’s experience reinforces this argument. He suggests that there were practical barriers which prevented his mother from fully engaging in his education. As a single mother, she could not attend parent’s evenings or assist him with his homework because she had other priorities such as housework and looking after his brothers.

Taiba also adds a bit of humour to her dislike of Bangladeshi culture:

“... the shutki (dried fish) in the luggage when coming back from ‘home’, old women spitting beetlenut juice on the streets, women wearing maxi’s (a long dress worn by many Bangladeshi women as home wear) and men wearing lungi’s (a sarong like dress – a national dress of Bangladesh) and Bata sandals going to the mosque [laughing]”

This is both a ridicule of the Bangladeshi culture (way of life) and also a statement of how material and physical features such as dress, appearance and smell are important factors for the third generation. This can be considered as a typical reaction from Bangladeshi teenagers born and brought up in London.

Taiba is both critical of her culture and also takes comfort from it at the same time. She dislikes the fact that Bangladeshis are extremely insular and the private is the public. The notion of community can be overbearing and this is something Taiba is critical of, “*everyone gossips, you have no privacy*”. However much she dislikes the communal and overbearing nature of her culture, Taiba is mindful of her early year experiences and would not consider moving away to a “*Bengali-free area*”:

“I don’t want to live in a Bengali-free area as we will stick out (N-CCBEL). For example, we cook a curry and there is a smell and people call our house ‘curry house’. In East London, everybody cooks curry. We would not stick out”

Unlike Taiba, however, it was precisely the intimacy and the lack of privacy found within her predominantly Bangladeshi community which Sanjida has fond memories of. For all six respondents, childhood memories and place of birth were very important in the identity process and establishing a sense of ‘self’ and community. She recalls stories of her childhood in Whitechapel in great detail:

“... everyone that lived there, it was like [pause] everyone was like a family. Everyone used to look out for each other. Everyone knew everyone basically in the area. You wouldn’t be embarrassed to come out in your pyjamas or come out in silly clothes [laughter]. I used to love coming out in the summer and playing. All of us would come out, there was no conflict whatsoever, like, everyone was fine with everyone basically. [pause] I think we had about three or four non-Bengalis living there and we were fine with them as well. You were able to play out there without my mum having to watch us because there would be other people there. We used to climb over into each others gardens without even asking. Everyone would be alright with it. We used to stay over till late and sometimes have sleepovers. I used to love living there [pause] if I had a chance to go back and live there then I probably would take it”

Sanjida’s discussion of her early childhood years conforms with Geertz’s (1996: 40-45) theory of “*primordial ethnicity*” based upon a strong kinship network, shared language, a strong sense of neighbourhood, shared history and an intense feeling of belonging together. This “*primordial ethnicity*” helps establish a sense of ‘community’. Sanjida does not plan to leave East London and her thoughts have been influenced both by her sense of ‘community’

and oneness with her Bangladeshi community and also because of her recent experience of racism by “white people” which has highlighted and reminded her of her ‘difference’. She takes comfort from the similarities she has with other Bangladeshis:

“I see myself living in Tower Hamlets (N-CCBEL). My cousins live in Essex and I would never want to live there. She’s just got white mates and there is probably around 3-4 Bengali people in the whole school and I would not be able to live like that... (R-SC)”

Saeed also echoes this notion of community and familiarity which roots him to East London:

“I would not leave East London... we need the Bengali community. When your house gets robbed everyone helps out”

Akbar, however, adds a more negative perspective to the debate of the Bangladeshi sense of ‘community’. Whilst Akbar finds a sense of comfort and security in what he refers to as “mini Bangladesh” (R-RS), he points out a problem in living in a racially segregated community especially within the context of a wider multicultural society:

“[Living in East London can be] negative as when someone goes out of the area they find it really hard to cope with daily things.. meeting with other people...like white people... [many Bangladeshis] can’t talk English... it could be an advantage and a disadvantage”

Unlike Saeed, Taiba and Sanjida, Azad has plans to move out of East London as he would like his own children to grow up in a crime free zone and have access to better schooling. However, Azad acknowledges the comfort level he feels in Bow living around people of Bangladeshi origin where he is part of the social majority:

“It’s probably because we are used to it. I have been living here all my life ... and I am used to the surroundings that I live in. I will feel uncomfortable in areas where I am the minority but I will have to get used to that”

Sanjida has undergone exactly the process that Azad is referring to - of moving out of a predominantly Bangladeshi community (Whitechapel) and living in a more racially and ethnically mixed area (Bethnal Green). Although it felt “weird” initially, Sanjida is philosophical about how you just have to make it work although she does not speak about her new community as positively as she does about her Bangladeshi community of Whitechapel:

“in the whole building, there’s about 5 families who are Bengali and the rest are mostly white and Chinese... it doesn’t really effect us but you know when you like grow up with your own culture and with so many of your own and then you suddenly go to a different place, its kinda weird but then you kinda fit into it”

Sanjida makes a key distinction between her “own culture” and her “own” people against the “white and Chinese” other. She is taking part in the ‘othering’ process and contributing to the ‘them’ versus ‘us’ rhetoric which is central in identity formation, especially when identities are a social minority fighting for recognition and sense of placement and power (Ericksen, 1993).

There is a degree of comfort and connection with people who look, dress and behave in similar patterns. This level of comfort for many third generation Bangladeshis however is challenged when placed in an environment different from East London. For example, Zeyba reminds us of her “skin colour”, religious and value differences compared to that of the majority tourist population during a family holiday to Spain:

“There is a sense of comfort in living in an area which is predominantly Bangladeshi. Everyone understands each other and we have similar cultural and religious beliefs [pause] You have an element of connection with everyone around (N-CCBEL), because I remember when I was in Spain and you see all these white people and their like half naked, and you just think, you just feel like the odd one out, you don’t feel in place with any of them (R-WM)... because you’re the one who is wearing a scarf, you’re the one who is not out in the beach, you’re the one with a different skin colour. But I guess the skin colour thing didn’t matter that much, it was more so the fact that I was wearing a headscarf... you see them in the morning sitting on the beach and you see them dressed like that I just think, ugh!... you think its wrong but they wont think its wrong... It makes then cheap (RL-UvsT)”

Zeyba's discussion highlights many important points. Not only is she telling us of her feeling like the "*odd one out*" in a predominantly tourist holiday destination but she is also passing moral judgement based upon dress and lifestyle choice. She is making a moral judgement between the "*half naked*" people on the beach and her head scarf wearing family, a judgement on what is 'right' and what is "*wrong*", and classy and "*cheap*".

This attitude of moral superiority remains consistent for many first, second and third generation Bangladeshis (Hoque, 2003b). I argue that for many Muslim women, a 'return' to religion or a proud religious identity displayed publically through dress and rituals is partly a process to re-claim self-esteem and to counter and reverse the 'otherization' process by putting Islam on a higher social and moral pedestal than white Western culture. In doing so, Zeyba is engaging in what Werbner (1994) has termed a process of 'fabulation' – where people have reductive, generalised and essentialist views of a particular culture, nation, gender and ethnic group. Crucially, Zeyba is firming up her Bangladeshi Islamic identity by contrasting it with the 'other'. Constructing identity through "*difference*" (Hall, 1996: 4) and through precisely what it is not (the 'constitutive outside') (Derrida, 1981) is one of the key avenues of how identities are created but renders Zeyba to gross generalisations and prejudices based on dress and lifestyle choice.

5.3(2) Language and Identity

The relationship between language, culture and identity was also a theme that consistently emerged throughout the conversations:

"If we don't know how to speak Bengali, it's going to be stupid in a way. We are Bengali and we must be able to speak our own language (L-BLCI)" (Saeed)

“everybody has a language. I need to communicate with my mum and she only understands Bengali (L-BLPC)” (Taiba)

Although all six participants lived in “*simultaneous*” (Kenner, 2004: 107-126) English, Bengali and, to a lesser extent, Arabic linguistic worlds rather than three separate worlds, the role of language in the lives of the participants manifested itself mainly in three ways:

1. Bengali as a language of practical communication;
2. English as a commercial language important for progress and modernity
3. Bengali as a language of history, heritage, culture and identity

Bengali as a language of practical communication

Bengali, for some was viewed more as a language of communication rather than a language fought over by their forefathers (Choudhury, 1974). Many viewed themselves as British (mainly because of birth right) and did not put any value onto the Bengali language. For example, Saeed speaks Bengali at home as his parents don't understand English and he sometimes speaks Bengali on the streets with his friends. Taking a pragmatic approach to language, Saeed argues that *“Bengali is a language which was not taught to me... I learnt Bengali naturally as everyone around me was speaking it. My kids will also learn it naturally”*.

The functional role of Bengali is something which Azad is also aware of. Azad admits that although currently he speaks Bengali at home he will mainly speak English with his own children in the future:

“Just say my mum and dad are still alive when my children are around (L-BLPC). They can't speak English so how will they communicate with my children ? (L-ECL)”

It is implied here that the fourth generation will hardly speak any Bengali at all.

Akbar's solution to his bi-lingual identity was to fuse both Bengali and English together. Akbar predominantly speaks Bengali at home and sometimes speaks English with his brothers. However, he would like to "mix" both Bengali and English when communicating with his own future children. He suggests, "if I can explain something better in Bengali, then I will speak Bengali. If I can explain something better in English, then I will speak English".

English as a commercial language important for progress and modernity

Like Saeed and Azad, the language of Bengali held a practical role rather than a historic or sentimental one for Taiba:

"my first words were 'mum and dad' not 'amma and abba'. I prefer English. My child needs to know Bengali to communicate with his/her grandparents (L-BLPC). But we need to speak English as we are modernising and want to fit in (L-ECL)"

Both Zeyba and Taiba view English as essential to a more modern world and to fit into British society. English for Taiba represents progress and modernity and Bengali, a language of communication, backwardness, almost rendered useless. The choice of language for Taiba is linked to the central question of identity. Taiba sees herself as 'British' and views the English language as a vital component of this. Her language choice is a badge of her nationality, citizenship and identity choice. She wants to "fit in [to]" British society and views English essential for this.

Taiba's comments add weight to the argument by Pennycook (1994) who suggests that English is an international language of power and modernity. This point is re-emphasised by both Akbar and Azad who are more focused on the British education system. They believe that Bangladeshi parents lack the knowledge of the British education system to help out their children and are far more interested in Islamic and Bengali education. Although he uses the

word 'Muslim' to describe his own identity, Akbar acknowledges the important social and economic value of a good British education in order to be able to *"live in this society"*:

"Most parents have this attitude that Islam is more important. Obviously it is important to Bangladeshis because we are Muslims (L-CA) but you have to understand that you have to teach [mainstream] education at the same time to live in this society (L-ECL)".

Whilst firm in his Islamic conviction, Akbar also believes that his mother's preoccupation with an Islamic education has held him back from fully participating in British society. Akbar's multifaceted identity is full of contradictions as he negotiates his Islamic spiritual education with the economic necessity of a conventional British education which he argues is a marker for *"progress"*. Akbar suggests that the Indian community's emphasis on Western education is one of the main reasons why they have moved forward and why Bangladeshis have been left behind in certain areas of social life such as education, employment and housing. The Indian community, argues Akbar, have the *"correct attitude"* to succeed in life. Akbar would even consider moving to Bangladesh in the future if the country became *"developed"*. Progress, development and modernity are important factors for Akbar and he feels that the only way this can be achieved is through a mainstream British education.

Similarly, Azad also believes that his parents are more concerned about issues related to Bangladesh rather than domestic issues in the United Kingdom. His parents, like many other first and second generation Bangladeshi parents are engaged in the politics of long-distance nationalism (people living, working and citizens of another country yet still concerned about issues related to the 'homeland') (Glick-Schiller, 2001; Ballard, 1994):

"Cause they care about Bangladeshi education, not really about the National Curriculum (L-ECL)). They don't really know much about it [pause] I didn't resent going to Bengali classes but they [his parents] put more importance on that than this education"

Azad is critical of his parents for subjecting the language of Bengali upon him. He associates the Bengali language as backwards, whilst the English “*national curriculum*” represented progress. Azad’s constant giggling whilst reciting the Bengali alphabet (“*ko, kho, go, gho...*”) was an example of his ridicule.

Bengali as a language of history, heritage, culture and identity

In contrast to the others, the Bengali language for Sanjida was central in the preservation of her identity and culture. Although she readily admits that she is British by birth and would not consider moving to Bangladesh to live, the continuation and preservation of the Bengali language remains important to her:

“I speak English and Bengali at home. I speak English with my brothers and sisters and speak Bengali with my parents. [pause] Sometimes I do speak English with my mum and dad and get told off for it ... [they say] ‘you’re Bengali why are you talking to us in English ?’... in a way this is a good thing and in a way it is a bad thing... cause like I’m so used to speaking English all the time.. sometimes it just comes out, but its also a bad thing because if I was to totally stop talking Bengali, I would be basically be stopping my culture going down [pause] Like if I was to talk to my kids in English then they would not learn Bengali and it would go on like that... and if that was to happen everywhere then Bengali wouldn’t be spoken in this country... language is important in preserving the culture.... I would like to pass it down into the future (L-BLCI)”

The above quote must be viewed within the context that Sanjida’s mother is a Bengali teacher at an after school club and her father has close connections to Bangladesh. Furthermore, like my own experiences of growing up in a traditional Bangladeshi family, Sanjida also is governed by a ‘speak Bangla only’ policy at home. Philosophically, she asks the question of what would happen to Bengali if everyone stops speaking it and it is this concern which

drives Sanjida to protect and preserve her language and recognise its importance to her identity.

Also, despite his insistence on the English language as a marker for progress, Akbar is also committed to the Bengali language and culture:

“[the Bengali language] is a part of our heritage, I wouldn’t want language to go away completely. Its part of who we are (L-BLCI)”

The loss of the mother tongue language, it can be argued, occurs among many immigrant communities in their attempt to integrate into Britain and other Western European countries (Colls, 2009; Shariatmadari, 2010). It is my contention, however, that we can integrate into a British world and still retain our cultural values and preserve our history, customs and language. Cultural and linguistic preservation should be viewed as a vital component with the ‘idea’ of Britishness. The English language should be viewed as the pragmatic language of communication for everybody and community languages, such as Bengali, as the languages of history and identity.

5.3 (3) Feelings of rejection – a sense of displacement in East London

The racism experienced by many of the respondents such as Taiba and Sanjida in the 1990s echoes my own experiences of harassment, name calling, rejection and displacement in the 1980s (refer to autobiographical chapter one). Immigrant children face many barriers in their journey towards integration – language, skin colour, different cultural traits, poverty, schooling, employment, amongst others. Knowing that you are different to the majority ‘white’ population and being constantly reminded of this ‘difference’ puts you in a position where you start to view the world in dichotomies of ‘black’ versus ‘white’, ‘powerful’ versus

‘powerless’ and ‘us’ versus ‘them’. This painful process can either reconfirm your personal identity or confuse it further. In addition, the many stories told by our parents and grandparents of early immigration experience of racism in the 1960s and 70s (as discussed in chapter seven) contributes towards a racialised world.

Saeed’s opinion of the ‘white man’ is mainly informed through his interaction with the police. Saeed, along with Sanjida and Taiba, has experienced direct racism himself. He has been called a “*terrorist*” and is engulfed in a post-9/11 religiously and racially divided world:

“... white people(R-WM) think that all Asian people are either paki’s or terrorists (RL-NR) [pause]. When an Asian man is getting battered or is dying – we don’t make the news. When a white man gets battered – it makes the news. They [white people] don’t give a fuck about us. We have to lie to police and say that a white boy is getting beaten up because if we say Asian they take their time in coming over (RL-IPI)”

It is evident that Saeed’s racialised world is a direct result of his experience with the police and he fails to distinguish between the ‘white’ teacher who continuously threw him out of the classroom, the ‘white’ policeman who racially abused him during a routine stop and search incident and the vast British ‘white’ majority who do not hold racist views or opinions towards Bangladeshis.

Akbar and Azad add a more pragmatic argument for the racialised and ethnically segregated world that they live in. Azad has no white friends either in college or within his social circles. Eventually, Azad wants to live in an area where there is more of a mixture of people from diverse backgrounds. Like Akbar, he also blames geography for his lack of interaction with people from other communities. Akbar remembers a violent incident in the early 1990s when a fight broke out between BNP followers and local Bangladeshi youth. His racialised world

has been crystallised ever since and like Azad, he feels that he needs to move away from “*mini Bangladesh*” in order to experience a more multicultural world. Azad argues:

“Bow is an area full of Bangladeshis. I went to an Islamic school which was also full of Bangladeshis and in college my classes also have no students from other cultures in (R-RS)”

Taiba’s experience can be considered typical of growing up in a mixed race working class housing estate in East London. She recalls being called a “*paki*” on numerous occasions after which she would remind the racist that “*we are not Paki’s, we are Bengali’s*”. This experience of displacement and rejection was complex and painful:

“We would constantly hear things such as ‘go back to your own country, you don’t belong here’. I thought, [pause] ‘are we different to other people’ ? Why did we come here in the first place ? Where do we actually belong if we don’t belong here?... we used to be scared to come out of our own house even to go to the local shops... why cant I be white?, I used to ask my mum. I used to scrub myself hard. I used to ask my mum to bleach me. Why can’t we be English mum ? (R-CR & R-SC)”

Sanjida also experienced similar verbal assaults both within her secondary schooling, on the streets and within her housing estate. Her father has been “*spat at*” on numerous occasions by racists. Sanjida, like Taiba, also displayed resistance towards local racists:

“I have had conflict with white people and they would turn around and say things like ‘why don’t you go back to your own country, you’re not welcome here and stuff like that’, you’d be like, ‘excuse me, I was born here’”

Her conflict with white people on the estate that she lives in and at school has made her feel different although she cannot understand why they are like that towards her. As far as she is concerned she is British as she was born here. The importance of the colour of skin is echoed here as Sanjida is being judged according to her physical appearance (skin colour and dress code) even though she thinks, acts and behaves just like most other teenagers. These incidents have driven Sanjida to re-evaluate her sense of belonging and identity as her difference, her

“*ethnie*” becomes more crystallised as she becomes more self aware when exposed to the durability and the ubiquitous presence and longevity of other ethnic communities around her (Smith, 1986).

Zeyba adds a very important cautionary note in the race debate. Recalling an incident when her friend was called a “*paki*” by an “*old English man*” just after the London bombings in 2005, Zeyba is quick to remind us all that “*you group people - because one white person done that to you, you start to hate all white people – that’s not right*”. Azad also reminds us that not all third generation Bangladeshis have experienced direct racism. London is a very multicultural society for Azad as there are people of many different colour, religion and cultures residing within its borders. To date, Azad has not faced any form of direct racism but he does acknowledge that many of his friends and family have experienced racism and that the situation is different outside of London where being a person of colour is to be within the minority. Therefore, whilst he has not experienced direct racism himself, he is aware of its actual existence.

The intention of this study is not to generalise. It is to highlight the life stories and experiences of six third generation Bangladeshis. For some, their world is a dichotomy of ‘black’ versus ‘white’ and often this is reflected in their choice of terminology. Others have not experienced any form of direct racism themselves. Like Zeyba, I argue that it is wrong to label all ‘white’ people racist just because of the action of a few although we all react to our own histories and experiences.

5.3 (4) Islam – identity, acceptance, belonging, spirituality and visibility

Islam as a social and spiritual force was evident in the lives of all the respondents. The words ‘Muslim’ and ‘Islam’ were mentioned 726 times during the first and the second interviews with the six participants. This, I argue, highlights the importance of Islam in their lives as it was the most consistently used phrase throughout the interviews. It is important to note that all of the participants were engaged in a negotiation of their Islamic identities within a post 9/11 and 7/7 world. This involves, for many, both a defence of Islam and a reaffirmation of it. Furthermore, all six of the respondents were born into the religion of Islam and therefore it can be argued that they are Muslims more by habit and culture rather than choice. As Sanjida confirms:

“my religion is important to me as well... Its basically my beliefs ... I am trying to practice... I wear a headscarf during family functions but not when I am going out... I do pray and I have read the Qu’ran (RL-ISS). Its important to me because now that I believe in that and if someone was to turn around and say something about my religion then I would get a bit offended and say like why you doing that for its my belief (RL-IPI)”

It is normal for Bangladeshis to be born into and exposed to Islam when you consider that 92.5% of the total number of Bangladeshis in Britain (283,000) in 2001 defined themselves as Muslims (Census 2001 [ONS 2004]; Peach, 2005: 22-24) and 90% of the approximate 145 million Bangladeshis from Bangladesh are also Muslims.²³ Bangladeshis, are therefore a religiously homogenous community although there is a minority of whom consider themselves to be Hindus and Christians (Peach, 2005: 22). As will be discussed in chapter eight, Islam for many third generation Bangladeshis represents a spiritual movement and a solution to their identity predicament of not being fully accepted as either Bangladeshi, British or English. This is what I have termed the development of a ‘Br-Islamic’ identity. Young Muslims across Western European countries are finding ways to reconcile their traditional faith with Western freedoms and forging what Le Quesne (2001: 53) has referred to as “*Euro-Islam*”.

²³ <http://pewforum.org>, 2009: 5

Some of the respondents viewed their Islamic identity more important than their national, ethnic and even their gender identity:

“I am proud to be a Muslim. Let them call me a terrorist. I don’t care” (Saeed)

“my religion is more important than my culture. My religion makes more sense to me (RL-IBC)” (Sanjida)

For Azad being identified as a Bangladeshi was clearly problematic:

“I would use the word Muslim but I don’t know if I would use the word Bengali. I don’t know why?”.

Azad chooses to use *“Muslim”* as his main badge of identity. A recent study on new ethnicities among British Bangladeshi and mixed heritage youth by Barrett et al (2006) adds weight to some of the voices above. The study found that the strength of religious identity varied across groups, with Bangladeshi participants having the highest levels. Their religious identity was stronger than their ethnic and British national identity.

Akbar coins the phrase *“Muslim Bengali boy”* in an attempt to reconcile both his Bangladeshi and Muslim identity. To Akbar, being both Bangladeshi and a Muslim does not need to be a choice and they both hold equal value:

“Being Bangladeshi is important to me as it shapes my identity and how I am, my attitude and everything but growing up here, the whole Bangladeshi Muslim cultural thing.... It’s in my culture to be Muslim [pause] I am a Muslim Bengali boy – that’s it”

The amalgamation of the *“Muslim Bengali boy”* is, however, complex and sometimes choices do need to be made. It is sometimes difficult reconciling Bangladeshi tradition with religious teaching. For example, Akbar contradicts his *“Bangladeshi Muslim”* identity by using his brother’s marriage as an example:

“my brother just got married and my mother wants them to stay with her. This is cultural. Islamically speaking, it is acceptable for them to move out and have their own space (RL-IBC)”

Building on the socio-political context of the growing popularity of Islam in Britain as discussed in chapter two, I argue that it is Islam which fills an identity void for many of the third generation Bangladeshis and gives them a sense of acceptance and belonging. Furthermore, the popularity and visibility of Islam should also be contextualised within the current political rhetoric of the ‘global war on terror’ where Islam is consistently viewed as an expansionist and fundamentalist religion whose followers are intolerant and extreme. Placed within this rhetoric, many third generation Bangladeshis are choosing Islam as a symbol of protest, anger and recognition. It has, for many, become a political choice rather than a spiritual one. For example, already angered by the constant stop and search by the police (Wintour, 2004), Saeed’s “*victim*” mentality (Hoque, 2004c; Lewis, 2007: 123-125) has expanded since September 2001 and intensified since the London bombings of July 2005:

“When I go on a train or a bus and we have a bag with us people from other cultures step aside... I have witnessed people stepping aside when people with beards come onto public transport... I don’t have a beard but my friends and I have been called ‘terrorists’ by drivers on the streets”

Saeed’s politicisation is even more evident through his morally polarised Islamic ‘us’ and non-Islamic ‘them’ division of the world (Omaar, 2006: 19; Yusuf quoted in *Q News*, 2001: 15; Lewis, 2007: 125). He believes that the non Islamic world do not like Muslims and believes that the “*twin towers*” was contrived by George Bush and not by Osama Bin Laden because of access to oil. He is convinced by the superiority of Islam over other beliefs. It is obvious that there is an immense amount of youth bravado and confusion. Also, Saeed is voicing dissent, anger and local area resentment over the treatment of Muslims in a post-9/11 world:

“Islam is very important in my life... err, I don’t smoke, blaze (smoke marijuana) or drink – fasting is easy for me [pause]. We are Muslims. It is the right religion and everything. Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world. What it says in the Quran is the truth. I have read it myself and people have also told me this. Everyone in the whole world knows it’s the truth but they don’t want to face facts (RL-UvsT & RL-IGL)”

It is evident that Saeed’s religious snapshot of the world is informed by his own sense of rejection, injustice and anger towards authority, his personal experience of being called a “terrorist” and those of people around him, the tabloid press with headlines such as “Islamic Extremists” (Shaw & Clements, 2008; Steel, 2008) and local area ‘street’ talk shrouded in hyperbole and conspiracy.

Although not as politicised and angry as Saeed, Zeyba has also experienced ‘perceived’ discrimination because of her hijab. She is proud to be a British Muslim but suggests that there are many reasons why being a Muslim since the London Bombings of 2005 is very difficult:

ZEYBA: “In the airport, they took you aside and they had to call the manager just so that you could come through. It just made you feel like, I don’t know, a different species or something (R-OTH)”

ME: “do you think this was because you and your family were religiously dressed ?”

ZEYBA: “well they didn’t stop anyone else (RL-IPI)”

Zeyba’s experience is reflected in the fact that the number of religiously aggravated attacks rose by 26.5% in 2005 (Moussa, 2006). Low level abuse and intimidation of Muslims has also increased (Githens-Mazer & Lambert, 2010) and the number of reported attacks since 9/11 is four times higher than usual whilst in the USA, attacks have risen thirteenfold including two deaths (Modood, 2005: x). These figures and incidences, however, must be

viewed within the context of the London bombings of 2005 and the wider geo-political security concerns since 9/11.

Furthermore, although “*comfortable*” with wearing the hijab herself, Zeyba has heard stories about people “*who wear the hijab or the full thingy (nikaab)*” who have been spat at by non-Muslims. Like Saeed, Zeyba is also contributing to a generalised stereotype of the ‘other’ (Lewis, 2007: 123-125). These experiences and media inspired ‘urban’ stories have heightened Zeyba’s Islamic awareness and have made her make a distinction between an Islamic ‘us’ and English white people ‘them’. Zeyba is coming to terms with a post 7/7 world and has been caught up in the ‘victim’ mentality against the tabloid fuelled irrational hatred towards British Muslims (France, 2005; Jeeves, 2006). It is argued that Zeyba’s airport experience and other local area incidences against Muslims have blurred her and others distinction between a perceived and actual hatred against British Muslims. This issue has already been highlighted earlier in our discussion of Islamophobia in chapter two (Runnymede Trust, 1997; Githens-Mazer & Lambert, 2010).

Just like her often contradictory views of Bangladeshi culture, Taiba’s encounter with Islam is also confusing. She rejects some parts of it and also embraces some of the core tenets of the religion. It was her father who coerced her into wearing the headscarf as a mark of respectability. Rejecting this Taiba is philosophic about the hijab debate:

“many of my female friends wear the headscarf but they also drink, blaze and have boyfriends. I will wear the scarf when I am good and ready (RL-ID)”

Islam, for Taiba, is still central in her everyday life. She is influenced by Islam Channel celebrities such as Dr Zakir Naik who through his oratory and public debating capabilities is

able to debunk other religions. This impact has led Taiba to believe that **“Islam is better than other religions (RL-UvsT)”** and has also installed a sense of affinity with other Muslims across the globe. Morley (2000: 3) argues that new communication technologies have contributed to the destabilisation of traditional ideas of home, homeland and nation and has led to the construction of a more *“pannational”* identity for many migrants living in the west. These new technologies, argues Morley, brings the public into the private world and provides the emotive feeling of broader social experience through the sharing of both broadcast time and ritual. Taiba’s fascination with the Islam Channel and Al-Jazeera, it is argued, helps establish and create this broader social experience with other Muslims across the globe.

Taiba also recalls fondly the stories of Mohammed the prophet of Islam told to her by her parents during her childhood years and she also engages in tea time discussions about Islam with many of her friends. Essentially, argues Taiba, Islam teaches me *“what is right and what is wrong”* and it is this rigidity and sense of discipline and belonging that attracts many third generation Bangladeshis to follow more devoutly the religion of Islam first introduced to them by their parents.

5.3 (5) Who am I?: I am British, not Bengali

The concept of ‘Britishness’ was an important and complex notion for all six respondents. Numerous studies highlight that many British born Bangladeshis consider themselves as ‘British’ (Basit, 1997; Manning & Roy, 2010; Frith, 2004). The place of birth was a determining factor in how they identified themselves:

*“I am Saeed from Burdett Estate. **I am British because I was born in Britain (N-BB)** – in the Royal London Hospital. Just because my parents are from Bangladesh it does not mean that I am Bengali. Where you are born and bred is what you are. Also, when you have a passport that says you’re British, then you are British”* (Saeed)

The colour of passport was also a factor for Zeyba whose British passport was the main determinant of her nationality. The passport was also the key document which made a distinction between the British ‘us’ and the ‘other’:

“Being British means that I live here and I have a red passport... People who have a different passport colour are not British because they are not ‘legal’”

However, this British national identity has many facets and is complex for many third generation Bangladeshis as Taiba and Sanjida remind us:

“I am a British/ Asian/ Bangladeshi. I will always put British first because I was born here, Asian second because of the colour of my skin and Bangladeshi third because my parents are from there and because my second language is Bengali” (Taiba)

“A British person is someone who is born here and brought up here... I am one hundred percent British [pause] no, not one hundred percent because I have got Bangladeshi culture in me (N-BBI). I’m not totally like what the British are like always out and about even up till late, staying up partying, drinking etc etc stuff like that... obviously we would go out sometimes like to eat sometimes, but we mainly eat home cooked food, we eat with our hands and not knives and forks (N-GENB)”(Sanjida)

Therefore, although Sanjida feels like she is British because she was born and brought up in Britain, there are still question marks over whether she is totally convinced of her British identity as she marks out material and social differences between her “*Bangladeshi culture*” and a generalised popular mainstream image of British people drinking, partying, staying up late and eating their food with knives and forks. For Sanjida, this is what British people do and she has question marks over her British identity because she does not fit into this image. She is socially different to how she understands British people to be and this difference is highlighted by Sanjida above. Sanjida, like Zeyba, has also engaged in the process of what Werbner (1994) has termed ‘fabulation’ – the process of generalisation and essentialism of cultures, nations, genders and ethnic groups.

Taiba is also quick to make a distinction between being British and being English. English to Taiba is a marker of ethnicity just like being Bangladeshi or Asian. To be considered “*English*” suggests Taiba, your mum and dad also need to be English, “*only a Whiteman can be considered English and I am not white*”. This echoes the experiences of racism and rejection in her early childhood discussed above. It also furthers Bagguley and Hussain’s (2005) argument that the notion of Englishness is problematic as it has become associated with the far right politics of ‘racial purity’. Many third generation Bangladeshis, like their fathers and grandfathers, still view the world through the prism of racism and rejection. Experiencing racism was very much a reality for them and was a factor in them realising or feeling equal or full citizenship within the United Kingdom. Saeed summarises this feeling, “*the English are white people. I can speak English but I am not English (N-EW)*”. This distinction between a racialised notion of ‘Englishness’ against a more plural and inclusive ‘Britishness’ was also a key finding of a research study by the Commission for Racial Equality in 2005 where ninety six people from various backgrounds were asked about the meaning of ‘Britishness’ (CRE: 22-23; also refer also to studies by Thomas, 2009 and Barrett et al, 2006).

It is argued that Britishness, for many third generation Bangladeshis from East London is real and tangible. It holds value for them mainly because Britain is their place of birth and is an acceptable identity marker. Britishness as a concept, however, is complex and is constantly evolving. This is discussed in greater depth in chapter nine.

5.3 (6) The location of ‘home’

Linked closely to the concept of 'Britishness' is the complex notion of 'home'. Despite the experiences of early year racism and feelings of rejection and displacement, Britain, however hostile is still viewed as 'home' for the participants of this study. Home for Taiba is:

"where you live. A place where you find comfortable. A place where family and friends live – where you feel welcomed. My mum was born and brought up there [Bangladesh] so she calls it home. All of her family are there so Bangladesh is home for her. Despite my difficulties with some racist people when I was growing up, home for me is in London. I am comfortable in East London. There are places that I am familiar with like Brick Lane, Whitechapel, Green Street"

Saeed echoes Taiba's equation of home with family, familiarity, place of birth and comfort.

He argues:

"Home is here, where I am living, where my family are. It's not Bangladesh as I was not born there. It's my parents home. My home is here. I went to Bangladesh when I was seven or eight... there were people living in very poor conditions. It makes you feel weird. When you visit other places like that you realise how comfortable your own life is"

Sanjida's discussion of how difficult it was for her grandfather to call Britain 'home' further highlights the importance of birthplace, similarity of customs with others and childhood memories in determining 'home' and a sense of 'ethnic community' (Weber, 1968[1922]: 389; 1997:18):

"I can understand why my father and my grandfather speak about Bangladesh with fond memories probably because they grew up there... if I was to grow up there then I would probably talk the same way... the way I talk about Whitechapel, I wouldn't be able to talk like that about Bangladesh... I never grew up there... where I am born and where my childhood memories are that's where the fondest memories are... sometimes I think that my dada (grandfather) preferred Bangladesh than here and I think why but then I think that if I had grown up in Bangladesh then I probably would think the same way... basically most of his life, he has been there... here is bidesh (foreign country) for my dada and over there is desh (home) for my dada (N-HCM)"

Zeyba's parents never told her about the history of Bangladesh. "My Bangladeshi-ness, my heritage" suggests Zeyba "I don't know if it's important to me, it's just a fact". Zeyba discloses a more confused and multifaceted identity than the initial "British" identity that she

was so assured of during the early part of her interview. The question of ‘home’ made Zeyba think deep about her history and heritage:

Zeyba: *“I guess I’m proud to be a Muslim but with British, it doesn’t really come into anything [pause] its not like I have a history of living here, I just live here [pause] I am basically Bangladeshi [pause] I’m all three, I guess”*

[pause]

Me: *“But earlier, you said that you were not sure whether being a Bangladeshi is important to you and now you use the word ‘Bangladeshi’ to describe yourself”*

Zeyba: *“err, it is important to me because I’m from there [pause] It’s just that being a Muslim is far more important. And, err with British, as I said, I just live here (N-BBI)”*

Zeyba’s comments above illustrate the multifaceted and complex nature of third generation Bangladeshi identity which is shared by many other British born Bangladeshis. A recent documentary by Selway (2010) highlighted how many British Bangladeshis are constantly negotiating the “three me’s” of being a “Muslim, British Westerner and Bangladeshi”. Whilst the colour of passport and birth place are strong determinants of British identity, deeper questions of the location of ‘home’ made some of the respondents like Zeyba question whether she was British, Muslim, Bangladeshi or a fusion of them all. This furthers Sen’s (2006) argument that there is often an “illusion” of a unique identity whereas the reality is that human beings have multiple identities.

Sanjida also has similar confusion over her identity:

“I see myself as British-Bangladeshi. In that order. My Muslim identity is also important... all three of them... in what order... I have no idea (N-BBI)”

It is one of the central arguments of this thesis that many third generation Bangladeshis are fusing all elements of their identities and creating a ‘new’ identity which enables them to be all three at any one time. This new ‘Br-Islamic’ identity is one which is not rooted to

location or space. It is, as Al-Ali and Koser (2002) have argued a new globally orientated identity which is re-defining the meaning and contours of 'home'. Zeyba and Sanjida's multifaceted identity above illustrates that they are as Grillo (2001:3) has suggested in a complex process of "negotiating cultures" and their "identities".

There are certain factors for the participants which are important in determining notions of home:

- Where you are born
- Where your childhood memories are
- Where your family and friends are
- Areas of familiarity

The idea of being British is even more appealing to some of the participants when faced with an alternative. Although, like Akbar, Sanjida has a deep connection with Bangladesh because she is "from there", she is thankful that her grandparents decided to come over to the UK:

"I am happy that they [grandparents] came here as I probably wouldn't be here.... Err cause I was brought up here and I'm used to the areas so if my mum was to turn around and say that on Thursday we were going to Bangladesh forever then I would dread it [pause] A couple of weeks was hard for me, let alone the rest of my life... the first time we went for a holiday. The second time, we went for my uncles wedding... I remember the hot sticky weather and the mosquito bites... I would not be able to live there. I would be able to stay there for about a month or a couple of weeks just as a holiday but I would not be able to live there... like the food as well, I did not like the food (N-CH & N-DBC)"

Unlike their parents and grandparents, some of the participants did not view Bangladesh as 'home' and as a place of 'eventual return' (Bhatia, 2006; Hoque, 2005; Anwar, 1979). Experiences of visiting Bangladesh has made London feel more like home. For example, whilst Taiba enjoyed the shopping, meeting her cousins and being treated "like a queen" in Bangladesh, she also remembers how difficult it was to communicate with her cousins, receiving wedding proposals even at the age of twelve, terrifying stories of witchcraft and the

“disgusting water”. Unlike Taiba, Akbar enjoyed his “holiday” in Bangladesh. Although home for him remains East London, he talks about his deep connection with Bangladesh. He recalls his experience during a three month visit at the age of twelve:

“it was very good, I very enjoyed it. I met all my real family... blood relatives... I haven’t got any family here in London. Everyone’s in Bangladesh... it was a different experience because they are your real family”

“Bangladesh was amazing. I remember going fishing with my cousin and playing football with my bare feet. That was a brilliant trip (N-BM)”

Similarly, despite her reservations voiced above, the “hot sticky weather” and the “mosquitoes”, Sanjida also has a connection with Bangladesh:

*“I rode the rickshaws in Sylhet, and the baby-taxis. You know, those funny van things.... sometimes I do wanna go, why do I wanna go ? *Its like, I’m from there (N-BM)*. Even though I was born here, its nice to go and see some of the people that I have not seen in a long time.... There are some things about Bangladesh that I did enjoy like when everyone gets together... everyone is sort of happy and its fun”*

This sense of connection with the motherland is a feeling which is associated predominantly with the first generation of Bangladeshi and other immigrant settlers (Anwar, 1979; Tinker, 1977; Bhatia, 2006). Clearly, however, Akbar and Sanjida also found this sense of connection with Bangladesh during their visits. In a Bangladeshi world which is alien and different, where there are language and economic barriers, there is still a feeling of deep connection for many British born Bangladeshis. This sense of belonging with the motherland is also apparent in many other British born South Asians such as the Sikh community from India who also feel this sense of connection with the ‘motherland’ (Mayo, 2010).

However, the practical barriers have rendered Bangladesh more as a place of “holiday” than spiritual homeland for some of the third generation Bangladeshis. Moreover, it has made them realise that East London is where home actually is. The notion of ‘home’, however, is

not as simple as the above criteria suggests. As will be discussed in chapters seven, eight and nine, a ‘new’ racism which has presented British born Bangladeshis as culturally ‘different’ (Barker, 1981), social alienation, poverty and displacement has led to many seeking alternative sources of power, voice and recognition through membership to a vibrant Br-Islam.

5.3 (7) A specific Bangladeshi female (gendered) identity

There are two distinct factors which separate the experiences of the third generation Bangladeshi girls to that of their mothers:

1. The changing role of the ‘traditional’ Bangladeshi woman;
2. The impact of Islam as a force for change especially for the younger generation of women.

The changing role of the ‘traditional’ Bangladeshi woman

Many younger generation of Bangladeshi women are more vocal and resistant to the idea of the ‘traditional Bangladeshi woman’ as depicted by Taiba in section 5.3 (1) above in her description of what her culture means to her. This notion of the homebound, quiet, passive and docile Bangladeshi woman (as many of their mothers were) is being challenged by many younger Bangladeshi girls. As White (1992: 3-4) argues:

“there is no set definition of being a woman in Bangladeshi culture... it is a ‘contested image’.... it is not fixed but variable and continually being defined and redefined by context and interest... there are many socio-political complexities”.

This “*contested image*” is reflected by all three of the females from this study who are very opinionated, vocal and ambitious:

“I love my debates. Like if I had something to say, I would say it. I’m not someone who would sit there and let you stand there and say something and I wouldn’t agree with it... I wouldn’t just sit there and go along with it basically... sometimes I do take it over the top but that’s me” (Sanjida)

“In terms of future ambitions... I would like to go to university, travel the world, learn different languages, maybe become a doctor or a lawyer and also have a business of my own – maybe a restaurant or a clothes shop (GBF-EC)” (Zeyba)

“I don’t want to be like my mother... all quiet, shy and hero-worshipping my dad and my grandma. If I don’t agree with something, I will say it. I won’t let them take advantage of me. I want more in life than just being a housewife and mother (GBF-CGBG)” (Taiba)

This shift from invisibility to visibility for many can be explained by a number of factors:

- More encouragement from second generation mothers to go onto further education and also engage in activities traditionally forbidden to them such as taking driving lessons (Choudhury, 2008; Phillipson et al, 2003);
- The demands of the modern market economy requires the need for a dual household income resulting in more women accessing employment (Mernissi, 2003[1975]).

These developments have challenged the ‘traditional’ role of Bangladeshi women. For example, Taiba mockingly summaries the difference in attitudes and aspirations between her mother and herself:

“I want to become a youth worker. I want to have my own car. I do not wear maxi’s like my mother – I wear PJs (pyjamas). My mum speaks Bengali, me English. My mum cleans. I will get my husband to clean”

Sanjida also adds:

“my mother does not force me to wear the burka like other Bengali mothers. She allows me to wear shirts and trousers”

The impact of Islam

The second factor that separates the experiences of many third generation Bangladeshi girls to that of their mothers is that of Islam. The devout more literal modern Islam practiced by many younger Bangladeshi females pushes for an equality of gender (which places women

on a pedestal of respect, motherhood and pushes for womens rights)²⁴ as opposed to the Bangladeshi cultural version of Islam which views women as domesticated home-makers (Bhavani & Ahmad, 2006). This level of high “*religiosity*” amongst Muslim communities (Akhtar, 2005: 164) is also replicated in other areas of Europe such as France (Le Quesne, 2001: 53). As Nilufar Ahmed (2005: 200) argues in her study of Bangladeshis in Tower Hamlets:

“For younger women their Muslim identity was not only the way they identified themselves, but also the way that they wanted others to identify them”

The point of contention is whether they have rejected one patriarchal culture and simply entered into another one which although affords many rights to women, nonetheless also chains them within a culture where men are still deemed as the ‘protector’ of ‘their’ women (Mernissi, 2003[1975]: 12). I argue that Zeyba’s academic aspirations and her aptitude for worldly travel and Taiba’s resistance against the Bangladeshi culture and her determination to succeed as a youth worker are examples of the positive space created for women as part of a modern Br-Islamic culture.

As will be discussed in chapter ten, however, the image of the new liberated Bangladeshi woman remains a myth for the time being for many younger Bangladeshi women. The project of the new modern liberated Bangladeshi woman is complex and is still in its early developmental stage. The ‘cultural pathology’ argument (Shain, 2003) (that South Asian Muslim women are passive, docile and oppressed) stills holds weight and is real despite the rhetoric of gender equality, women’s rights and democracy (Kamrava et al, 2006) promoted by a modern Br-Islam.

²⁴ www.channel4.com/culture/microsites/I/Islam_unveiled

This painful struggle between modernity and tradition is mostly evident in Sanjida. For example, despite her vocal opinions, Sanjida readily accepts her gendered role of babysitter and admits to be given the roles of ironing and washing. Furthermore, she *“does not see anything wrong with an arranged marriage (GBF-GBG)”* as she has faith in her parent’s ability to find her a husband (a *“good proposal”*) as long as it was not *“forced”* and she was *“happy”*. Her inner battle to reconcile her Bangladeshi culture and tradition with the fact that she is a British born teenager with a different way of life (‘culture’) is evident in the confusion of her gendered role and responsibilities. Sanjida is unsure whether she wants to be a housewife, bring up children, cook and clean just like her mother or whether she would like to forge a professional working career for herself. She feels the need to make a choice and that she cannot do both. A good Bangladeshi girl, argues Sanjida, needs to be able to *“cook, clean”*, keep her husband *“happy”* and *“raise children (GBF-GBG)”*. This is important for the upkeep of the family name which is important to Sanjida.

5.4 Conclusion

This chapter is central for the whole study as it outlines some background history of all of the six respondents interviewed as part of the main field research. It was important to locate the personal stories, experiences and voices of the six respondents within the broader research question of third generation Bangladeshi identity from East London. It was equally important to code, categorise and then analyse some of the data, narratives and common themes that have emerged from the interviews and introduce some of the key patterns that connect the experience of being a third generation Bangladeshi from East London such as:

- the disconnect from Bengali culture and the evolving nature of language in the lives of many of the respondents;
- experiences of early childhood racism leading to feelings of rejection and displacement;

- the development of a new and vibrant Br-Islamic culture which provides its members with identity, acceptance, belonging, recognition and visibility;
- a confusing and evolving discussion of Britishness, national identity and the location of 'home';
- and the establishment of a gendered Br-Islam for many young Bangladeshi women which remains governed by Bangladeshi culture, patriarchy and tradition.

The main objective of this chapter was to introduce the reader to some of the key themes and to provide an insight into the many components of third generation Bangladeshi identity. The sub-themes highlighted in the above tables suggest that there are multiple and complex issues that the respondents of this study are grappling with. As a result, many have developed multifaceted and complex identities. Guided by the philosophy that there is a reciprocal relationship between theory and data (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996), the next section of this thesis (part three) focuses on the multiplicity and complexity of these identities by analysing the data and themes from this chapter within a wider theoretical framework.

Part Three
Data Analysis

Introduction to Data Analysis section

The following chapters analyse in detail the data that has emerged from the previous chapter under the five main components of identity guiding this research – *linguistic, racial, religious, national and gender/female*.

Five themes will be examined in the following chapters:

1. Chapter six will examine a linguistic identity and will analyse the importance of Bengali culture in identity formation;
2. Chapter seven will examine a racial and ethnic identity paying particular attention to incidences and experiences of early childhood racism leading to feelings of rejection and displacement for the participants;
3. Chapter eight will examine the central notion of a Br-Islamic identity and how this ‘new’ identity provides a sense of acceptance and belonging;
4. Chapter nine will examine a national ‘British’ identity and will problematise the concept of ‘Britishness’. Crucial in this chapter is a discussion of the location of ‘home’ for the third generation Bangladeshis from East London;
5. Chapter ten considers the development of a gendered identity especially for young Bangladeshi women.

Although the chapters differ in terms of subject area, there is much overlap between the separate areas of analysis. **All evidence from the data analysed within these chapters point towards the emergence of a modern and vibrant Br-Islamic identity amongst the**

participants of this study which is enabling them to negotiate their identity riddle of being British born Bangladeshi Muslims.

The narratives of Sanjida, Zeyba, Taiba, Saeed, Akbar and Azad are interwoven within the wider theoretical discourse that follows in the forthcoming chapters.

Chapter 6

The relationship between the ‘Bengali’ language and the ‘Bangladeshi’ Culture: Implications for Identity

6.0 Introduction

The fact that all six participants spoke to me in English throughout our conversations and not in their mother tongue of Bengali merits further analysis. I argue that by choosing to speak English over Bengali, they are essentially exerting an identity preference. Furthermore, I argue that there is a direct relationship between language, culture and identity. That by rejecting a language, you are also essentially rejecting the history and culture that is associated with the language. And by assuming a language, you are at the same time forging new cultural identities for yourself. This chapter examines the important role of languages within the lives of the six participants and whether there is a relationship between their linguistic and cultural identity.

Importantly, when you consider that the Bengali language is central to Bangladeshi national and cultural identity, what role, if any, does the language play in the lives of third generation Bangladeshis from East London. Identifying with being ‘Bengali’ or ‘Bangladeshi’ is steeped in Bangladeshi nationalism. The Bangladesh War of Independence from West Pakistan in

1971 was fought over race, geo-politics, economic disparity between East and West Pakistan and most importantly, culture and language. The Bengalis from East Pakistan wanted to protect their own distinct culture and language from the dominant Urdu speaking West Pakistanis. Therefore, whilst the emergence of Bangladesh as a nation resulted from a number of socio-political factors, the protection and preservation of the “*cherished*” ‘Bangla’ language became embedded in the struggle for Independence (Choudhury, 1974: 10-12). It is argued that whilst Bangladesh as a ‘nation’ is still a relatively new concept for many, being Bangladeshi as an identity marker and being able to speak the Bengali language have a complicated and yet crucial relationship.

It becomes clear through the interviews that I have conducted that the role of language has an important bearing in how the third generation Bangladeshis identify themselves. Language plays both a practical and personal role in their lives. Some use the language purely for functional communication, some see the Bengali language as having no relevance whatsoever in their lives and future aspirations and engage in a rejection of both the language and its cultural associations, whilst others view the Bengali language as central to their heritage and cultural identity (refer to [appendix 6](#)). It is important to note that we do not become part of a linguistic community in a practical, psychological and ideological sense just by speaking a certain language. There are socio-political complexities such as race, class, ethnicity and nation which determine membership to a linguistic and cultural community.

A complicated picture emerges in which some of the respondents are consciously resisting both their mother tongue and their cultural heritage whilst replacing the Bengali language with other languages of communication. I argue that they are engaging in ‘political’ acts by the rejection of Bengali and its associated Asian national ‘backwards’ character (Fryer, 1985;

Banton, 1997) and assuming others (English and conversational colloquial Arabic) which provides both practical and ideological meaning to their lives. Also, by speaking English, many are attempting to become accepted, modern, liberal and forward thinking at the same time. Furthermore, it is my argument that the recent development of an Islamic and Arabic socio-linguistic identity is a dual rejection of a British social system that has systematically excluded working class immigrants from its benefits (Shain, 2003:21) and also a rejection of an alien and somewhat irrelevant Bangladeshi culture for many. It is the central argument of this chapter that many third generation Bangladeshis are assuming positions of power, representation and rejection by the choice of language they communicate in.

This chapter is divided into five sections:

- The first part of this chapter examines the key distinctions between the ‘Sylheti’ and ‘Bengali’ language;
- The second part of this chapter discusses the complex relationship between language and cultural identity;
- The third section discusses the role of English as an international language of power (Pennycook, 1994);
- The fourth section of this chapter examines the emergence of Arabic as a language of power, acceptance and belonging for many third generation Bangladeshis;
- The conclusion summarises the key arguments from this chapter

6.1 Distinctions between the ‘Sylheti’ and ‘Bengali’ language

Although there are some phonetic commonalities and overlaps in terminology, there remains much difference and tension between the official language of Bangladesh (Bengali, sometimes also referred to as ‘Bangla’) and the language of ‘Sylheti’ spoken at home by the nine participants of this study (three from the pilot study and six from the main study). Firstly, numerically, with approximately 181 million speakers worldwide, the Bengali language is ranked as the sixth most spoken language globally covering geographical regions

such as Bangladesh and the Indian state of West Bengal.²⁵ The Sylheti language, in comparison, is spoken by approximately 9 million people and it is mainly confined to the district of Sylhet and the Chachar district of Assam, India.²⁶ In addition, outside Bangladesh and India, the largest country in which Sylheti is spoken widely is in the United Kingdom. Gardner (1995a) estimates that approximately 95 percent of the British Bangladeshi community (estimated to be around 283,000 according to the Census 2001) speak Sylheti. This proportion of Sylheti speakers in the United Kingdom will be challenged significantly by the recent influx of urban educated ‘Bengali’ speakers from Dhaka and Chittagong who have entered Britain under the student visa scheme in their thousands over the past few years (Grady, 2009).

Secondly, Sylheti is less a dialect of Bengali and more an outright separate language in itself. Extremely poetic and influenced by the Persian and Arabic languages, the Sylheti language has its own distinct grammar and a rich heritage of literature in the Sylheti Nagri script going back at least 200 years.²⁷ The Sylheti language, however, became a casualty of the 1971 War of Independence when the newly formed government discouraged its use in favour of the Bengali language (Kershen, 2007). Historically situated within a backdrop where a strong linguistic consciousness had led to the Bengali Language Movement in 1952 and also bound up within the politics of Bangladeshi nationalism, it is argued that the ‘unofficial’ Sylheti language underwent a process of “*symbolic violence*” (Bourdieu, 1991) by the elitist ‘official’ language of Bengali as the political elite sought to unite the nation under one language against West Pakistan in 1971.

²⁵ http://www.ethnologue.com/ethno_docs/distribution.asp?by=size

²⁶ <http://www.sylheti.org.uk/page2.html>

²⁷ <http://www.sylheti.org.uk/page2.html>

Thirdly, there are many other socio-political and historic binaries which emerge through our analysis of the distinctions between the Sylheti and Bengali language. It is often argued that Sylheti is spoken by poor, illiterate, unskilled, rural peasants whilst Bengali has become more associated with the urban educated economic and political elite. That somehow, language choice, is linked to social and cultural mobility and economic opportunities. It must be noted that such a binary is problematic as there are many urban Bengali speaking people living in abject poverty as well as educated Sylheti's who can communicate well in Bengali when they choose to.²⁸

Whilst it is important to draw out and discuss these distinctions between the 'Bengali' and 'Sylheti' languages in the context of this chapter, I use the terms 'Bengali', 'Bangla', 'Sylheti' and 'Bangladeshi' interchangeably throughout this chapter and the rest of the study. My decision to use these terms generically has been influenced by the fluidity of these terms within the British Bangladeshi community. Although, there is much socio-political, geographical and cultural distinctions between these languages (as discussed above), the participants of this study as well as a large proportion of the British Bangladeshi community do not make distinctions between these terms. These terms, therefore, have a dual meaning - the language spoken by Bangladeshis and also a term used to describe the national cultural identity of Bangladeshis. Furthermore, as will become apparent through the personal narratives in this chapter, although the participants of this study actually speak and understand 'Sylheti', they themselves refer to the language as either "*Bengali*" or "*Bangla*". Their linguistic identities have become entangled within a national as opposed to regional discourse and they themselves do not make a distinction between 'Sylheti' and 'Bengali'. For many, such as Sanjida and Akbar, they are 'Bengali' and their mother tongue is also

²⁸ <http://www.sylheti.org.uk/page2.html>

‘Bengali’. Therefore, in trying to re-tell ‘their’ stories, my reference to ‘their’ usage of language also uses such terminology. However, it is important to note that as the majority (95%) of British Bangladeshis originate from the Sylheti region of Bangladesh and all of the participants of this study are Sylheti, whenever there is reference to ‘Bangladeshi culture’ or ‘Bengali language’ in this study, it is in reference to a particular Sylheti rural Bangladeshi culture and language.

6.2 Language and Cultural Identity

As Lyon and Ellis (1991) suggest, the relationship between language and cultural identity is no better highlighted than in the Welsh situation where it has become compulsory to speak Welsh in certain political and media offices. The Welsh language has become entwined with maintaining both a national Welsh and distinctive cultural identity. A “*land without a language, [is a] land without a heart*”, suggest Lyon and Ellis (1991:247).

Of more relevance to this study is the question of whether language plays a role in determining the identities of the participants of this study. Clearly, there is a complex relationship between language, culture and identity:

“The Bengali language is central to who I am. I am Bengali” (Sanjida)

“Bengali is our mother tongue... we are Bengali and we must be able to speak our own language” (Saeed)

“My mum only understands Bengali. I need to speak Bengali to communicate with her” (Taiba)

“My parents only speak bits and bobs of English. I know my children will speak mainly English in the future. Therefore my parents will need to learn English in order to communicate with them” (Azad)

“English is important as it allows me to express myself and also socially interact with my friends. It also allows me to access the internet and will help me secure a good future. I find it difficult to understand and speak Bengali... Bengali holds no relevance in my life” (Zeyba)

“We are Muslims and it is important to learn Arabic so that we can understand the meaning of the Qu’ran. English is also important for future job prospects” (Akbar)

There are many questions that need to be considered when examining bi-lingual identities especially in a country like the United Kingdom where English is the dominant and official language and the language of communication, commerce and power (Bourdieu, 1991). For example, do people adopt ‘multiple’ linguistic identities depending on context and social environment ? Do we become Bangladeshi only when we speak Bengali or when we are being spoken to in Bengali ? Or can we remain British, and still speak Bengali with our friends ? Is our culture being transformed when we start to exert our bilingualism and does this also mean that we are ‘bi-cultural’. For example, just as we can speak both English and Bengali, can we also be ‘culturally’ Bangladeshi and British/ English ? Can a Bangladeshi enter into English cultural life just because he/ she speaks fluent English ? Similarly, can a white Anglo-Saxon person access Bangladeshi life and understand the experiences of Bangladeshi people just because he/she speaks Bengali fluently ? These are important questions which I shall consider in the scope of this chapter.

Bilingualism can determine identities. All six participants grew up in an environment of a bilingual family and community where a combination of languages were spoken. For example, all six ‘naturally’ alternate between the Sylheti-Bangla and English language which are used both within the familial and community context. Often, languages are combined in everyday speech. For example:

“there was so much maya (love) between everyone” (Sanjida)

“Khano ?(where) where shall we meet?” (Saeed)

“I have to call home everyday at 6pm. Amma sinta koron (my mother worries)” (Taiba)

The usage of language by the participants during the conversations all had an element of code switching. They adapted to certain contexts through their choice of language. This level of code switching within a sentence or a conversation indicates their awareness of myself as a Bangladeshi who understands Bengali and thus in linguistic terms enables them to make an adjustment to ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ status (Baker, 1993). I have termed this free alternation of English and Bengali to communicate with people as a form of ‘*Banglish*’. Building on Harding and Riley’s (1986) classification of bilingual family types, the language usage by the participants could be described as fitting into Romaine’s (1995:183-185) ‘type six’ family type as there is a mixing of languages. Indeed, Akbar himself suggests that he would like to “*mix*” the languages of Bengali and English when communicating with his own children in the future.

It is well documented that “*unnatural*” patterns of speech tend to breakdown and have a short shelf life (Grosjean, 1982: 174). A context where a mix of languages is used freely by the third generation seems natural as they are living in a multicultural country where there are variations between mainstream and community languages. Free alternation of languages is natural but there is also a danger associated with this pattern as Mills (2001: 387) points out, “*the majority language may slowly become dominant when a child reaches school age and is affected by school interactions and friendship patterns*”. However, the majority language is not English in many schools in Tower Hamlets. For example, 95% of the pupils from Smithy Street Primary School are of Bangladeshi origin of whom 99% speak Sylheti as a primary

language.²⁹ Whilst English may not be the ‘majority’ language, however, it is still the ‘dominant’ (Bourdieu, 1991) language in East London. This is a crucial difference, especially in regards to many third generation Bangladeshis who although understand Bengali, still choose to speak English as their main form of communication.

‘Choosing’ or being ‘coerced’ to speak the dominant language are equally important considerations when discussing the relationship between language and cultural identity. Although recent studies have examined the role of bilingualism within the lives of children from ethnic minority communities (Ghuman, 1995; Conteh, 2003; Kenner, 2004), the field of childhood bilingualism, nonetheless, has been dominated by accounts of the experiences of middle class children from European or North American backgrounds. Crucially, argues Mills (2001: 387), this “*brings to the fore issues of choice and representation*”. Furthermore, it highlights the argument that “*many children have had no choice in becoming bilingual*” (Romaine, 1998: 61). The notion of choice is an important one for the participants of this study. They have been ‘coerced’ to speak and learn the language of English as most books, internet, mass media, the schooling system and the system of governance and commerce demands the need to learn English. Furthermore, English for many “*secure[s] a good future*” as Zeyba states above.

The ‘choice’ factor was a key determinant in Mills (2001) study of ten third generation Pakistanis from the Midlands who spoke Urdu, Mirphuri, Punjabi and English. Developing on Romaine’s (1998) work, Mills makes a distinction between ‘elite’ and ‘folk’ bilingualism. Elite bilingualism is the domain of the middle class and privileged members of any societies and cultures who choose to learn a language. Folk bilingualism, on the other hand, is a

²⁹ www.primarylanguages.org.uk

domain which is participated in by ethnic minority groups who become “*bilingual involuntarily in order to work and take part in the educational and welfare social structure*” (Mills, 2001: 387). Therefore, bilingual by necessity and not through choice. It is argued that the participants of this study are firmly established within the ‘folk’ parameters of bilingualism. They are also making a conscious choice to learn English in order to benefit from and become members of the very society that they are living in.

Furthermore, bilingualism cannot be isolated from its political context. As a concept, Phillipson (1988) describes the process of ‘linguicism’ in which the ideologies and structures which are used to legitimate, effectuate and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources (both material and non-material) between groups which are defined on the basis of language. Linguicism is therefore similar in its workings and effects to racism, sexism, classism, ageism and other similar structures and ideologies which serve to maintain inequality in society. In this instance, and as some of the participants of this study highlight (Azad, Zeyba, Akbar), the language of English reinforces old ‘orientalist’ demarkations as it takes on a role of power, progress and modernity, whilst Bengali and to a lesser extent, Arabic (as community languages) are viewed as archaic and backwards. Such tensions, according to Cummins and Skutnabb-Kangas (1988), are rooted in the power relations between dominant and subordinate groups in wider society. Educational establishments have typically reflected and reinforced such power relations through actions such as punishing a child for speaking their mother tongue at school and through its centrally developed, nationalistic, Euro-centric and imposed curriculum which pushes forward a particular brand of knowledge and power upon learners determined by the political elite (Apple, 1982, 1993; Ross, 2000). As Conteh (2003: 18) argues, for many bilingual children, the pressure in school is to learn English as quickly as possible in order to progress economically and socially.

Minority languages are largely ignored within the school environment and young learners speaking mother tongue language are viewed as problematic (Kenner & Hickey, eds, 2008: 2). The outcome of this, argues Cummins (1996, 2000) often results in a ‘subtractive bilingualism’ which has negative cognitive effects. This ‘subtractive bilingualism’ leads to the child not valuing and developing confidence in their own cultural identity and their linguistic heritage which results in them questioning their academic abilities (Cummins, 1996, 2000). The phenomenon of bilingualism, therefore, has become entangled with questions of social class, power relations and national identity as it is not the language itself which is the issue, but rather the attitude towards minority community languages which reflects and reinforces power relations in society (Miller, 1983: 110-126; Conteh, 2003: 18-19).

To what extent are bilingual people also bicultural ? Mills (2001: 389) has suggested that “*biculturalism, in the sense of two distinct cultures co-existing or combining, in some way, in one individual, is related to that individual's sense of identity*”. Mills concluded that language was a “*crucial*” component for maintaining the children’s sense of identity of being both British and Pakistani. Whilst they spoke English fluently, their mother tongue which was weaker in terms of proficiency, allowed them to maintain a bond with their families, religion and communities which was important to them. The English language and the mother tongue allowed them to enter into two different worlds (a bilingual and bicultural world) and thus created multiple identities. However, Mills found that both the identities of British and Pakistani were accepted with “*equanimity*”. Therefore, language played a significant part in “*managing [their] identities*” (2001: 383).

Whilst the third generation Pakistanis accepted both English and the mother tongue with “*equanimity*”, this is not to suggest that both languages can merge together and forge one multicultural identity. Crucially, you are either Pakistani or British. When you are presented with language choices, argues Mills, you are also choosing an identity (2001: 400). The two states of being bilingual and bicultural “*are not necessarily coextensive*” (Grosjean, 1982:157). People who regularly use two languages can also be monocultural (Mills, 2001: 389). Similarly, a monolingual person may be bicultural in sharing the beliefs and rituals of two cultures. For example, a person who cannot speak Bengali may engage in the ritual of arranged marriages and also eat rice and curries as a staple diet mirroring some of the everyday cultural practices and beliefs of many Bangladeshis. However, sharing Bangladeshi cultural practices without a Bengali linguistic grounding does not necessarily allow you access into the Bangladeshi cultural world.

For example, the Bengali language, for Sanjida, is an important part of the Bangladeshi culture and is intrinsically linked to the question of identity. Both Sanjida’s parents and Sanjida herself recognise the importance behind the preservation and maintenance of the Bengali language:

“I must get into the habit of speaking Bengali especially at home. If me, my brothers, sisters, cousins and Bengali friends stop speaking Bengali then the language will die. Our children will not speak Bengali and our language is important for preserving our culture”

Sanjida is making many statements relevant to this whole debate of the relationship between language and identity. She is making a direct link between the Bengali language and her personal and cultural identity, she feels that her language is under threat because it is not being spoken enough and therefore feels the need to maintain the language and “*pass it down into the future*”, and crucially, she has a clear ‘understanding’ of this relationship between

language and identity. Language, culture, identity and heritage are therefore mutually interdependent for Sanjida. Although Sanjida was born in Britain, she saw her language affiliation in terms of belonging to her country of origin, to Bangladesh.

Sanjida was also influenced by her prescribed Bangladeshi gender role which emphasised marriage, family and the preservation of culture (Aston et al, 2007). As such, she felt the need to maintain and “*pass down*” her cultural language. The fact that her mother is a Bengali teacher also plays a part in her thinking. Furthermore, whilst Sanjida speaks both English and Bengali at home, her ‘language choice’ is guided by and influenced by her parents ‘speak Bangla only’ policy at home. This form of “*linguistic parenting*” (Mills, 2001: 386) is a deliberate strategy adopted by many second generation immigrant parents around the world in trying desperately to preserve the mother tongue and also moulding the personal identities of their children (Dosanjh & Ghuman, 1996; De Houwer, 1998). Also, by the constant question posed to Sanjida and her siblings from her parents of “*you’re Bengali, why are you talking to us in English?*”, she is essentially being asked to make a ‘language choice’ and therefore a choice of identity. More importantly, she is being reminded that she is not English but a Bangladeshi and that her mother tongue is important in preserving her sense of identity. Whilst putting more importance on the languages of English and his Arabic Islamic identity, Akbar sums up Sanjida’s thoughts when he suggests, “*the Bengali language is part of our heritage... It’s a part of who we are*”.

Biculturalism, as a concept, is complicated. Having access to two different languages, whether by choice or social coercion, does not mean that you have access to two different worlds. The experiences of all of the six participants of this study and myself echoes Grosjean’s (1982) argument that being bilingual does not mean that we are bicultural. These

complex entities are not “*coextensive*”. In contemporary multicultural society, people are judged, defined, included and excluded by a multitude of factors. Despite linguistic commonalities, class status, skin colour, language, gender, religious affiliation and sexuality remain barriers which prohibit full societal participation and sets Bangladeshi people apart from ‘others’.

What our bilingualism allows us to do is as Mills (2001: 389) suggests, “*have access to experiences in different communities and also acquire features of different cultures in various combinations*”. This leaves our sense of identity in a state of flux. Bilingualism allows us a ‘window’ into another world and culture. Whether you understand that culture or are ‘accepted’ or ‘invited’ into that culture remains a complex journey. Understanding another language and being able to speak in that language enables you to simply ‘communicate’ and maybe understand some of the nuances. But our self identity, I argue, is based more on heritage, experience, memory and by what ‘others’ define us by. Bakhtin’s (1981: 287) notion of coming into being or becoming self aware through dialogue with others is important in this debate:

“In dialogue a person not only shows himself outwardly, but he also becomes for the first time that which he is, not only for others but himself as well. To be means to communicate dialogically”

6.3 English as a language of power

Attitudes towards languages is important for people growing up in bilingual environments. People adopt both positive and negative feelings towards a particular language and this affects the attitudes of language groups towards themselves and towards other groups. There are key differences in status and power attached to certain languages and this association with

status and power often affects the attitudes, often confusing, towards mother tongue and dominant language (Baker, 1988: 160). As Grosjean (1982: 127) suggests, *“in the end, language attitude is always one of the major factors in accounting for which languages are learned, which are used, and which are preferred by bilinguals”*. Although the importance of Bengali as a language of heritage and culture is understood by some of the participants of this study, clearly, others place a higher value on particular languages such as English and Arabic. Choosing to exert a language, I argue, correlates with identity choices. Speaking English, conversational Arabic and Bang-lish provides them with a voice and a sense of power. This new linguistic identity underpins the development of an emerging Br-Islamic identity within many third generation Bangladeshis from East London.

The usage of English as a language both within a home, schooling, community and social environment was a reoccurring theme for the respondents. My argument here is based on the attitude and value put upon the dominant language of English by the participants and also based on Mill’s suggestion that language choice inform choices of identity (2001). Zeyba states:

“I speak English all the time. I was born here, my friends speak English, my sisters all speak to me in English. Even my dad speaks to me in English. I find Bengali difficult to understand and speak. English is natural for me”

Akbar argues:

“If I can explain something better in Bengali, then I will speak Bengali. If I can explain something better in English, then I will speak English”

Although Akbar suggests that English for him has practical communication implications, it becomes apparent throughout the interview that he equates the language of English with modernity, progress and also helpful towards his ambition of becoming a successful businessman. Akbar is driven and ambitious and equates materialism with success. He views Bangladesh as a place to go on “*holiday*” and would only contemplate living there if it “*develops*” as a country. Although Akbar understands the relationship between the Bengali language and his cultural roots, he still chooses to speak English at home with his family and also adopts a form of ‘Bang-lish’ with his friends. Like Zeyba, the English language is also “*natural*” for Akbar. Similarly, Azad puts higher value on the English language than the Bengali language and equates English with a successful career in education and accounting. Confirming to what many language theorists (Skutnabb-Kangas et al, 2006: 4) have termed the “*economic, social and political returns [of English] that are at present stacked against most mother tongues in the world*”, Azad ridicules the backward and impractical nature of the Bengali language:

“You tell me, what relevance will Bengali have for my career ?”

Taiba also equates English with progress and modernity:

“...we need to speak English as we are modernising and want to fit in”

The notion of language choice is confusing and complex and often contradictory. Although Akbar himself understands the importance of the Bengali language as it is a “*part of who we are*”, by suggesting that he will send his own children to Arabic over Bengali classes, Akbar questions me, “*Why do they [his children] need to learn the language of Bengali ?*”. This is a clear example of the emergence of a new Br-Islamic identity emerging as English and Arabic are seen as languages of relevance and modernity. Kibria (2006) argues in his study of young

Bangladeshis in the UK and USA, that the ‘weak’ Bangladeshi public identity resisted by many younger generation Bangladeshi Muslim youth stands as a point of contradistinction for their own modern ‘new’ Islamic identity.

Crucial to my understanding of the theoretical reasons as to why the English language is held in such high esteem by not only many of the participants of this study but also people from all over the world is my interpretation of Alaistar Pennycook’s (1994, 1998) examination of the role of English as a international language and Pierre Bourdieu’s (1991) analysis of symbolic power associated with certain languages.

English as an international language gives you access to many privileges – a better education, better job prospects, better life opportunities, more opportunity to travel, a ‘universal’ medium to communicate with others, engage in debate, listen to and interact with print and digital media, access to the internet, and the list goes on. English is the main language of books, newspapers, airports, international business, science and medicine, academic conferences, sports, advertising, popular culture (music and media) and the usage of the language in numbers and in prominence is growing. English as a global language is likely to reach a peak of around two billion in the next ten to fifteen years (Graddol, 2006: 14). Symbolically, the language of English also promises you access to an ‘ideal’ life for those wanting material success based on modernity and progress as highlighted in some of the voices above.

Pennycook’s (1994) examination of the complex interplay between the English language as a ‘gatekeeper’ to higher social and economic positions (Tollefson, 1989; 1995) and as an international language of media and commerce reveals a convincing argument which

suggests that English as an international language is neither neutral, natural or beneficial. Taking a critical look at the spread of the English language across the globe, Pennycook (1994), argues that placards written in 'English' to support a televised demonstration by 'Chinese' students in China over political change has more potency because it has mass universal appeal. English is both a political language and also a language of power and commerce. This is the reason why the new emerging states from Eastern Europe and Central Asia during the 1990s adopted English as the second official language and also modelled themselves in terms of tourism, banking, commerce, industry and English language teaching as their European and North American counterparts. It was their attempt of 'modernising' and connecting with the outside world.

Pennycook argues that English is wide spread across the globe because it enables many people to access positions of material and social success. This is a school of thought which Azad, Zeyba, Taiba and Akbar buy into. The theory of language as a form of "symbolic" power was developed by the French political scientist, Pierre Bourdieu (1991). Bourdieu developed his thinking in response to one of the forefathers of sociological thought August Comte who suggested that language was an entity for all to use. In criticising this school of thought, Bourdieu argued that there are two types of languages that exist in most societies: the 'official' ('legitimate') language whose members included the privileged elite and the 'unofficial' language. The legitimate language is usually the official language of a society (ie; English for the United Kingdom), and possession of this legitimate language was seen as a symbol of national unity and gave you the 'linguistic capital' to progress and survive in the employment and educational market. This linguistic capital became part of what Bourdieu called 'cultural and social capital' which helped define membership and exclusion from certain sections of society.

Bourdieu argues that all other linguistic practices and dialects were measured against the mainstream official language. As a result, other languages were defined negatively. This “*symbolic*” violence on other languages led to a form of intimidation which resulted in the people in possession of a community or another language actually devaluing their language because of the symbolic responses they received from others when they spoke such a language. This pattern of viewing English as the official language within the United Kingdom and the “*symbolic power*” associated with English and the subsequent devaluation of the Bengali language because of the symbolic violence from others mirrors the linguistic journeys of some of the participants of this study such as Akbar, Taiba, Zeyba and Azad.

There are also practical elements of the spread of the English language to consider when discussing English as a global language of power and prestige. The proliferation of global tourism accelerated by cheap airline deals, globalisation (Baylis and Smith, 2001), the internet revolution (Aronson, 2001), the growth of world political organisations and geographical unions between countries, NGOs and the expansion of impressive technology has meant that human interaction and communication has become more wide spread making a universal or global language of communication more necessary. These developments have also led to the expansion of the English language. The English language is ubiquitous, it is everywhere. As Pennycook (1994: 5) suggests, “*English and English language teaching seem ubiquitous in the world, playing a role everywhere from large scale global politics to the intricacies of peoples lives*”.

Pennycook contests that the proliferation of the English language across the globe is bound up with notions of strategy, profit, exploitation and power. Phillipson (1992) has referred to

this as a form of “*linguistic imperialism*”. Pennycook (1997: 7) further argues that there is a cynicism behind the growth of English as an international language, “*the central argument here is that English is bound up in a wealth of local, social, cultural, economic and political complexities*” (1994: 7). Adopting a critical outlook to the English as a neutral, natural and beneficial language school of thought as argued by Platt, Weber & Ho (1983) and Kachru (1992), Pennycook suggests that this line of thinking has tended to become the only issues of debate and has thus obscured other questions surrounding power relations and perpetuation, deliberation, and the accessibility of English only for the elite and privileged.

There are obvious problems with English as an international language:

“there are [detrimental] cultural and political effects of the spread of English: its widespread use threatens other languages; it has become the language of power and prestige in many countries, thus acting as a crucial gatekeeper to social and economic progress; its use in particular domains, especially professional, may exacerbate different power relationships and may render these domains more inaccessible to many people; its position in the world gives it a role also as an international gatekeeper, regulating the international flow of people; it is closely linked to national and increasingly non-national forms of culture and knowledge that are dominant in the world; and it is also bound up with aspects of global relations, such as the spread of capitalism, development aid and the dominance particularly of North American media” (Pennycook, 1994:13)

The findings of Graddol’s (2006) study, however, highlight some limitations with Pennycook’s argument. There is no denying that English as a language wields international economic, social, cultural and symbolic power. However, in an illuminating study of the decline of English as an international language, Graddol argues that there are signs that the global predominance of the language may fade within the foreseeable future. Complex international, economic, technological and cultural changes, he argues, have started to

diminish the leading position of English as the language of the world market, and British interests which enjoy advantage from the breadth of English usage.

One of Graddol's conclusions is that in the modern globalised world, monoglot English graduates face a bleak economic future as qualified multilingual young people from other countries are proving to have a competitive advantage over their British counterparts in global companies and organisations who are increasingly catering towards a new market. Alongside this development is the notion that whilst many countries are introducing English into their primary education curriculum, British schoolchildren and students do not appear to be gaining greater fluency in other languages. This does not, I argue, necessarily affect the symbolic power of the English language but it does highlight that it becomes necessary to be fluent in an additional language in order to compete in a global economy. These languages, however, reflected the current global market economy and was in languages such as Spanish, Arabic, Mandarin, Japanese, French and German. I argue that the language of Hindi will also become important as India undergoes rapid economic expansion. These languages are not 'community languages' and also reflect actual and "*symbolic*" (Bourdieu, 1991) power status attached especially in terms of the market economy. For example, the rise of oil prices and the ongoing political instability in the Middle East has made Arabic an important economic and political language.

Clearly, knowledge of the English language³⁰ either excludes or includes you into a prestigious club. It includes or excludes you from further education, the decision-making and power/ political process, positions of employment, prospects, better life chances and social and political positions. This line of thinking has been echoed by Akbar and Azad in their

³⁰ I argue that it is the standard form of English that exerts power

pursuit to become a successful accountant and businessman and do well in the British education system. As mentioned earlier, Akbar, like Azad suggests Bengali education as something which has held him back almost conforming to a racialised conception of South Asian, black people and Arabs as being barbaric and backwards (Solomos, 1992; Layton-Henry, 1992). Although Akbar is proud of his Islamic background, he still views conventional English education, over his Arabic and Bengali education, as a marker for progress. This, I argue, is the psychological legacy left by British colonialism (Pennycook, 1998). Furthermore, he wants to run his own business in the future and wants to move to Central London. He is aspiring to become part of the educated and economic elite and his English education is important to this aspiration.

There is a complicated thought process developing. Both Azad and Akbar understand the importance of the Bengali language as a marker of their identity (as Akbar states, *“Being Bangladeshi is important to me as it shapes my identity and how I am, my attitude and everything”*) yet also complain about the practical relevance of this language in their everyday lives. English education and the English language was favoured as a *“symbol”* (Bourdieu, 1991) of power, modernity and progress. Azad, Akbar and Taiba are confirming to the argument put forward by Pennycook that the prominence of the English language as a ‘gatekeeper’ is both giving them access to certain positions of social and economic esteem and at the same time posing a real threat to indigenous languages. Akbar’s question *“why do they [his future children] need to learn the language of Bengali ?”* further heightens such a threat and adds weight to Volosinov’s (1973: 71) argument that you cannot *“divorce”* language from its *“ideological impletion”* implying that language both *“assume[s] a culture [and] support[s] the weight of a civilisation”* (Fanon, 1967: 17-18) and is linked to certain

types of ideologies, either hegemonic and or dominant, or to languages viewed as backwards and uncivilised.

I argue that the negative and positive ideologies attached to Bengali, Arabic and English play a significant role in the reasons why many of the participants chose to exert certain languages over others. Languages are generally arranged in a hierarchy of two levels, one which carries prestige and power, whilst the other is evaluated as peripheral and inferior to the first. The role of the Arabic language and Islam as a new form of political and linguistic identity is to be discussed below. A new form of linguistic identity is emerging which has become entwined with a language of resistance and “*recognition*” (Taylor, 1992).

6.4 The Arabic language as an alternative source of power, identity and meaning

The remainder of this chapter discusses the growing trend of Arabic as an alternative language of power and meaning to some of the participants of this study. The previous section of this chapter argued that English was a commercial language of relevance which enabled some of the participants to “*modernis[e]*”, “*fit in*” and “*secure a good future*” (Taiba and Zeyba). The emergence of Arabic, however, is steeped more in ideology and provides linguistic membership to a global ‘imagined’ (Anderson, 1983) Islamic community which has a rich history of 1400 years (Saeed, Blain & Forbes, 1999).

Importantly, the Arabic which is widely used and learned is not the ancient classical Qu’ranic Arabic. Qu’ranic Arabic is poetic and rhythmic and does not correlate with everyday modern standard Arabic widely spoken socially by millions of people from the Middle East and beyond. Qu’ranic Arabic is still taught, however, to many young Bangladeshis in Madrassa’s

and in after school classes in Tower Hamlets and thus has a theological purpose. Young people mainly memorise verses of the Qu’ran without understanding its meaning. Many scholars of Islam, however, have suggested that in order to understand and appreciate the true meaning of the Qu’ran, one must be able to read and understand the text and the many books written about the meaning of the Qu’ran in Arabic.³¹ People who learn modern Arabic are more likely to be able to interpret and understand the ancient scripture of the Qu’ran. This is one of the key reasons for the growth in Arabic language learning (Khan, 2010).

Although there is a growing trend amongst many third generation Bangladeshis to learn modern standard Arabic (Khan, 2008), in practice, however, Arabic is rarely used as a form of social communication amongst themselves. English, or *Bang-lish*, are still the predominant languages used. Arabic is thus an ‘imagined’ (Anderson, 1983) than an ‘actual’ linguistic community. The usage of colloquial Arabic, however, is commonplace in Tower Hamlets. Many young people in Tower Hamlets are increasingly using colloquial Arabic as a social language amongst themselves. For example, “*salaam alaikum*” (hello, peace be upon you), “*kyaf a hall*” (how are you), “*aaki*” (brother), “*ukthi*” (sister), “*walahi*” (I swear), “*jazakallah*” (thank you) are common phrases that are widely used and I argue, points towards a wider trend of the growing importance of Islam in their lives. Furthermore, four (Sanjida, Akbar, Taiba and Zeyba) out of the six respondents of this study greeted and said farewell to me in Arabic whilst Saeed continuously used Arabic phrases throughout his interviews (refer to [appendix 6](#)).

Many do not even understand the meaning of such terms but nonetheless still use them because people around them are doing so. As such, they are caught up in a culture of “*Arabic*

³¹ Yaqoob, www.geocities.com

slang which is slowly replacing other terms of endearment such as ‘al right mate’, ‘geeza’ and ‘dude’” (Khan, 2010). I argue that the wide usage of English twinned with conversational ‘slang’ Arabic in Tower Hamlets performs a dual function. Firstly, it symbolises a resistance towards a ‘backward’, distant and ‘traditional’ Bengali language and culture (Kibria, 2006). Secondly, it provides a linguistic base for the development of Br-Islam.

There is wider evidence which points to the emergence of modern Arabic as a community and global language. Graddol (2006) notes that the fastest growing ‘world’ languages are Arabic and Chinese and both languages have a particularly youthful demographic. Also, Arabic as a GCSE and A Level subject and the prominence of Islamic studies as a degree is also increasing in the United Kingdom. For example, data from the National Centre for Languages (CILT) suggests that between 2000 and 2009, the national entries for GCSE JCQ Arabic rose from 1318 to 3130 (+137%). During the same period, however, there was a decrease in entries for GCSE JCQ Bengali from 2,124 to 1,407 (-37%).³² These statistics add weight to my earlier assertion that the relevance and wider usage of the Bengali language is diminishing in modern times.

There is also much localised anecdotal evidence of the emergence of a linguistic Br-Islam. For example³³:

- There are increasing numbers of third generation Bangladeshis who are deviating away from Bangladeshi cultural names and either changing their birth names or their

³² www.cilt.org.uk

³³ Much of this localised anecdotal evidence stems firstly from personal observation and secondly, from a lengthy interview with the deputy director of the London Muslim Centre (Mr Shaynul Khan) on the 4th of December 2008 who has an expert overview of the rise of Islam in East London.

own children's name into more Arabised Islamic names such as 'Hamza', 'Usama', 'Muhammed', 'Mariam';

- The Islamic bookshop has become common place in most streets of East London such as the Al-Furqan bookstore just outside the East London Mosque in Whitechapel Road;
- There are increasing numbers of young women wearing the hijab and jilbaab³⁴;
- After-school and Saturday Arabic classes have become over-subscribed to the detriment of the 'Bengali' language. For example, the waiting list for enrolment at the East London Academy is nearly two years (Khan, 2008);
- There are increasing numbers of professional people enrolling onto Arabic evening classes at London universities such as Birkbeck and SOAS. For example, the language centre at SOAS takes over 1000 registrations on their various Arabic language courses on an annual basis³⁵;
- There is an increasing trend of young married couples to emigrate to countries such as Syria and Egypt to study Arabic and the Qu'ran for a period of one to two years (Khan, 2008);
- Broadly speaking, mosque attendance during Friday prayers and Ramadan observance has also increased in recent years (Khan, 2008).

The evidence above points to a growing local, national and international trend of Islam as a 'new' source of socio-political identity for many people (Kibria, 2006) in tune with trends of globalisation (Henzell-Thomas, 2002: 117-120).

Whilst my analysis of Arabic as a new language of protest, power and meaning has been fuelled by the conversations that I have had with the six participants of this study, the origins of my thinking stems from a debate I had with one of my cousins in 2004. In a heated discussion over the role of the Bengali language for our sense of identity, he suggested that:

³⁴ 'Ethnic clothes mental health link' (2008), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/7347092.stm>

³⁵ <http://www.soas.ac.uk/languagecentre/languages/arabic/>

“Islam teaches us to read the words of god as revealed to us by the Prophet Muhammed, peace be upon him. It then tells us to learn the language of the country that we are living in (English) and then if the child has time and energy during the week, he/ she should learn his/ her mother tongue. We are Muslims first, British second, and Bengali third”

It was evident that he had a hierarchy (Alladina & Edwards, 1991) in terms of the importance of language to himself. He has also clearly tried to fuse his religious obligations to the divine with his sense of British citizenship to a nation. His cultural and ethnic identity was non-existent. When I asked him, how his children were going to communicate with their grandparents who only spoke Bengali, his answer was hesitant and unclear. His views were echoed by some of the participants of this study whose sense of identity was rooted within a religious arena:

“inshallah (God willing), I would like to go to Egypt to study Arabic after university”
(Akbar)

“I would love to go to Arabic classes and learn the language but I hate classrooms” (Saeed)

“I go to Arabic classes four times per week. The classes are boring and the Mudarris (Teacher) is very strict but I understand the importance behind the Arabic language” (Zeyba)

“Islam and Arabic education is more important to me than Bengali. I don’t know why?”
(Azad)

Taiba also reiterates the importance of Islam in her life:

“my religion [Islam] is very important to me. It guides me and is a vital part of my identity as a Muslim. It makes a distinction between me and others. I would like to practice my faith better... For example, wear the headscarf all the time, pray and learn Arabic. Inshallah, in time, I will”

The above quotes highlight three interrelated modes of thinking. Firstly, some, like my cousin, are also engaging in a hierarchical thought process, placing their Islamic identity above their cultural background and language. By placing more emphasis on their global religious affiliations, they are at the same time involving themselves in a process of resisting their Bangladeshi cultural identities. Secondly, the combining of English with Arabic colloquialism was evident for many. Like *Bang-lish*, this, I argue, is a form of *Arab-english*. Thirdly, for some such as Sanjida, whilst Islam was an important identity marker, the Bengali language remained “*central*” to her sense of Bangladeshi identity. Like the third generation Pakistanis from Mill’s study (2001: 400), it could be argued being Bangladeshi and speaking Bengali for some of the participants was more of an “*emotive and emotional tie*” and operates more symbolically than practically as it helps maintain a sense of their origins, their heritage, their affiliation and belonging to a country they may never have visited.

Some of the participants are engaged in an internal struggle in the sense that being Bangladeshi is both “*important*” to them yet at the same time, they don’t quite understand or fit into the cultural mosaic of what it means to be Bangladeshi. This was illustrated in Saeed’s dilemma in reconciling his Bangladeshi heritage with his British born Westernised cultural lifestyle:

“I know that the Bengali language is important for my culture, but [pause], but I just don’t know how and why. I mean, I am Bangladeshi and I am not at the same time, if you know what I mean ?,[pause] Its really confusing”

It is argued that many, such as Saeed above, are involved in what Bhabha (1994) has termed the “*past-present*” thought process as they are trying to give a meaning to their present by examining their past. This process of syncretism is not necessarily a pain and trauma free experience especially when the values of home/ family life and society at large have to be reconciled (Watson, 1979). It is argued that some remain on the “*margin of two cultures and*

two societies which never completely interpenetrat[e]” (Park, 1928: 892; Stonequist, 1937). Consequently, many have developed “*bi cultural identities*” which perform “*functional response(s)*” to their social predicament - being Bengali at home, Muslim on the streets and local community and English at school and at the work place (Dosanjh & Ghuman, 1996: 24).

Furthermore, the emergence of a Br-Islamic identity which has a linguistic base and a religious infrastructure is an identity of rebellion and rejection. A rejection of authority, a rejection of their parents backwards beliefs and a rejection of mainstream Western values. It is their ‘difference’ (dress code, language, skin colour, culture, rituals) which resists the mainstream and challenges the status quo (Castles & Miller, 1993; Gupta, 2009). Considering that a recent report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that 70% of Bangladeshi children were growing up in poverty in Britain (JRF, 30/04/2007) and in general Bangladeshis ranked high in terms of poor housing, low income and unemployment (Babb et al, 2006: 80), it is my argument that the ‘different’ Br-Islamic linguistic identity is also a political opposition to their ‘voiceless’ and ‘powerless’ position in society.

Many second and third generation Bangladeshis have become actively involved in addressing their ‘powerlessness’ by engaging in political and social life and media debates, taking up political offices and engaging in peaceful street demonstrations. Br-Islam, for many, is therefore a visible protest against their ‘powerless’ position in society as well as a religious and spiritual identity. Their rhetoric is a language of equality and a language of protest. Amongst others, their usage of Arabic slang, the prominence of the hijab, the growth of the beard are examples of ‘differences’ which are “*embedded in social, economic and political struggles*” (Pennycook, 1994: 15). Embracing Islam and the Arabic language are also status

symbols and therefore is an attempt for many to enter into a prestigious higher Islamic social class (Mills, 2001: 392).

6.5 Conclusion

The role of language played an important role in the complex and multifaceted identities of the participants of this study. There were clearly some painful linguistic journeys undertaken by some of the participants which has led to much confusion and contradictions. All of them, apart from Azad, understood the importance of the Bengali language as a source of cultural identity. However, it was the practicality and necessity to learn and maintain the Bengali language for future generations in an English speaking British world which caused much confusion. For some, such as Akbar, Azad, Zeyba and Taiba the mother tongue of Bengali was an impractical language and English was viewed as the language of progress, commerce and modernity. Sanjida was the main participant who was deeply troubled by the inability of the third generation Bangladeshis to understand the importance of mother tongue maintenance as a source of Bangladeshi cultural identity. Akbar also made such a correlation. Saeed viewed it from a practical point of view and spoke Bengali with his parents because they could not speak English, although he did understand the importance of Bengali.

All six participants, however, were unison in their membership to a new emerging Br-Islamic identity which viewed the languages of English and Arabic with equanimity. Whilst English provided a gateway to commerce and a “*good future*” (Zeyba) for some, a commitment to learn the Arabic language provided ideological meaning and belonging for others. The language of Bengali, I argue, will become a victim of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1991) as

it becomes devalued and redundant in a modern Br-Islamic world where English twinned with Arabic will wield the symbolic and linguistic power.

Before I move onto a detailed examination of the components of this Br-Islamic culture and identity, there is another necessary area of investigation which merits analysis as it explains why Bangladeshis in East London continue to be excluded, alienated and marginalised from the wider political process. It is because of this powerlessness and marginalisation that many third generation Bangladeshis have become part of a new and vibrant Br-Islam as a response to not fully belonging to either a culturally rooted Bangladeshi community or a 'white' mainstream British nation and society. It is my contention that the actions of racism in whatever guise (overt, subtle, institutional, symbolic, cultural) lie at the core of the feelings of alienation, 'second class' and exclusion from mainstream society for the participants of this study. The following chapter examines the important concept of race and racism in contributing to a multifaceted, complex, and new Br-Islamic identity.

Chapter 7

A question of ‘race’: *exclusion and “second class citizenship”*³⁶

7.0 Introduction

“the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the colour line – the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and in the islands of the sea”

(W.E.B Du Bois, 1989[1903]: Forethought)

“the capacity to live with difference is, in my view, the coming question of the twenty first century” (Stuart Hall (1993: 361)

“Britain is now two entirely different worlds, and the world you inherit is determined by the colour of your skin” (Salman Rushdie (1982: 418)

W.E.B Du Bois had insight in making this depressing prophecy about the racial antagonism in the twentieth century. The Holocaust in Nazi Germany (Burleigh & Wipperman, 1991), the African American Civil Rights Movement (Haley & X, 1973; Escott & Goldfield, 1990: 539-607; King, 1995) and the Apartheid system in South Africa (Mandela, 1994; Posel, 1991) were examples of state controlled systems of governance based on racial discrimination against people of colour and ethnic origin. Stuart Hall’s constructive contribution to Du Bois’s prophecy nearly a hundred years later makes the question of “*difference*” a twenty first century issue as well. Whilst both Du Bois and Hall are concerned with the question of

³⁶ The term “second-class” citizenship is borrowed from an interview I had with a third generation Bangladeshi as part of the research for a BBC radio documentary in 2004

discrimination based upon race, Hall departs from the ‘colour line’ debate and is more preoccupied with the discourse of ‘difference’ and ‘culture’.

This chapter argues that the experiences of many of the participants of this study suggests that the “*problem of the colour line*” or as Sanjida calls it “*the skin colour issue*” and “*socially structured racial inequality and disadvantage [still] persist*” in the twenty-first century (Bulmer & Solomos, 1999: 3). The “*colour of your skin*” (Rushdie, 1982) remains an “*inescapable social marker*” (Ballard, 1994: 2-3) and sets Bangladeshi people apart from non-Bangladeshis. Questions of race, racism and ethnicity have dominated social and political debates to such an extent in recent times that it has displaced class (Lee & Turner, 1996; Pakulsi & Waters, 1996) and other forms of social inequality (language, gender, religion, sexuality, age, disability) as the main barrier to societal participation (Goldberg, 1990).

Like their parents and grand-parents, many third generation Bangladeshis have not benefited from full citizenship from a British society in which they were born into and therefore are resentful of their position of exclusion and alienation. I argue that they are half way through Gordon’s (1964) ‘Seven Stages of Assimilation’ as prejudice, discrimination and power struggles still exists. It is noted, however, that skin colour and ‘difference’ does not exclude all people of minority origin from mainstream societal participation. There are numerous examples of many materially and academically successful people from the Chinese, Indian and Arabic communities in Britain.³⁷

³⁷ Luard, 2005; www.managementtoday.co.uk, 3/4/2007

It is my contention that racism in whatever guise twinned with poverty and low levels of education (Amin, 1992) governs the daily social lives of many Bangladeshis, locates them within the politics of ‘difference’ (Castles & Miller, 1993; Gupta, 2009). This determines their social and political position of marginalisation, ‘powerlessness’ and “*second class*”, and thus directs their identities.

Furthermore, many of the participants of this study continuously made a distinction between themselves and a stereotypical view of the “*white man*”. They were aware of themselves as a separate racial and ethnic community. Their experiences of racism have reinforced the socially constructed notions of ‘difference’ and ‘otherness’ and has pushed many to manage their identities within the contours of ethnic, linguistic and religious affiliations.

This chapter is divided into four sections:

- The first part of the chapter is a theoretical discussion about the complexities of race and racism;
- In section two, the discussion moves on from the “*colour line*” debate and discusses “*new*” (Barker, 1981) forms of racisms in particular the concept of ‘cultural racism’;
- The experience of Bangladeshis in the year 2010 cannot be understood without an examination of the racialised local history of East London. The third part of this chapter undertakes such an investigation;
- The fourth and final part of this chapter will discuss strategies of resistance against racism and will attempt to outline a future *beyond* racism.

7.1 Theories of race

“We became part of England and yet proudly stood outside it. But to be truly free we had to free ourselves of all bitterness and resentment, too. How was this possible when bitterness and resentment were

generated afresh every day ?”

(Hanif Kereishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990))

The Jim Crow laws in the United States between 1876 and 1965 which mandated racial segregation in all public facilities and the apartheid era in South Africa demonstrates the visible images of racial domination which can permeate a society and the social, political and economic distance which can separate black and white people from each other. As Bulmer and Solomos (1999: 3) observe, “[in nearly all societies] almost always the white person or white group has been in a position of superiority, and the black person or group a situation of inferiority, lesser power or influence, and having to justify themselves”. W.E.B. Du Bois (1989[1903]: 5) highlights what he calls the “*double consciousness*” of black people which results from this social difference between black and white people:

“Why did god make me an outcast and a stranger in my own house?... It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, - An American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two un-reconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder”

It is argued that Du Bois’s discussion of “*double consciousness*” can be applied to the social position of many third generation Bangladeshis. They too feel like “*outcast[s]*” and “*stranger[s]*” in their “*own house*” (Britain). They also measure themselves and see themselves through the eyes of “*others*” (the “*white man*”). Also as Kureishi (1990) highlights above, many Bangladeshis, I argue are “*part of England*” yet they also stand “*outside*” it. They are “*warring*” against the “*twoness*” of being both Bangladeshi and being British, two “*un-reconciled strivings*”. This quote from Du Bois illustrates the complexity of race and racism and how the sense of duality and double consciousness are factors which also

affect many of the third generation Bangladeshis from East London. This notion of feeling like “*outcast[s]*” and “*stranger[s]*” in Britain is something which is real and tangible for young Bangladeshis and is reflected in the personal experiences and voices below.

Akbar’s memories of clashes between followers of the British National Party (BNP) and Bangladeshi people in the 1990s and his upbringing in a predominantly Bangladeshi neighbourhood has made him make the distinction between “*white people*” and ‘Us’ (“*British Muslim Bangladeshis*”). This is the “*twoness*” of Akbar’s identity. Although Akbar has experienced direct racism whilst growing up in Tower Hamlets, he nonetheless aspires to be like the “*white man*”. Like Azad, Akbar equates material success and power with “*white people*”. I argue that Akbar and Azad are both buying into the superiority vs inferiority dichotomy between white and black people that Bulmer and Solomos (1999) have referred to above.

Sanjida has experienced direct racism from “*white people*” within the school playground and also on the streets:

“I have had many scuffles with white girls in school and in my estate simply because they have called me a ‘paki’”

Sanjida experiences direct racism on a routine basis and she recalls an incident when her father was “*spat*” at by some white youths in her council estate in Bethnal Green. Sanjida’s experience here is an example of feeling like an “*outcast*”, a “*stranger*” in her own house. Similarly, Taiba’s experience is typical of growing up in a culturally diverse working class estate in East London. She recalls being called a “*paki*” on numerous occasions after which she would remind the racist that “*we are not Paki’s, we are Bengali’s*”. This experience of displacement and rejection was complex and painful:

“I really wanted to have white skin. I was scared. I hated being black or brown or whatever else. I wanted to be white just so I wouldn’t hear things as ‘go back to your own country, you don’t belong here’”

Mirroring some of the experiences of Taiba and Sanjida, Zeyba asks rhetorically *“where is it exactly that I am supposed to go back to ?”*

Saeed’s opinion of the ‘white man’ is mainly informed through his interaction with people in authority such as teachers and policemen. He recalls an incident during a residential to Norfolk with his youth club when he overheard one of the “white” activity instructors call Saeed and his friends a *“bunch of monkeys”*. It must be noted that Saeed, mainly because of his life experiences, is full of youth bravado. I argue that he is also a victim of an upbringing in an ethnically segregated estate and thus holds generalised and highly inaccurate opinions of the *“white man”*. He fails to distinguish between racists and the British ‘white’ majority who do not hold racist views towards Bangladeshis.

It is evident from the stories and quotes above that racism plays an important role in directing the identities of the participants of this study. These incidences of rejection and displacement have pushed them to re-evaluate their sense of belonging as their differences (clothing, skin colour, way of life), their *“ethnies”* (Smith, 1986: 41) have become more crystallised as they have become more self-aware when exposed to the durability and the ubiquitous presence and longevity of the ‘white man’. In terms of population statistics, being of white Anglo-Saxon origin still constitutes the majority in Tower Hamlets (52%)³⁸ and also throughout England (87%).³⁹

³⁸ www.towerhamlets.gov.uk

³⁹ Census 2001, www.statistics.gov.uk

The theory of race is constantly evolving. Historical discussions of ‘race’ as a concept is steeped in colonial and imperial history which suggests that differences based upon biology, language, culture, place of origin, membership to an ethnic group and physicality determine morality, intellect and ‘pure’ culture. Contemporary forms of racism cannot be divorced from this historical concept of racism.

There can be no doubt that the enslavement of millions of people of African origin and the subsequent Trans-Atlantic slave trade has left a huge social and psychological imprint which still plays a major social role in black/ white relations in the contemporary ‘racialised’ world. This system of bondage, servitude and subordination of black slaves by white masters did not only affect people from Africa. Tinker (1974) has highlighted the negative impact of indentured servitude on the Indians from South Asia who were exported to countries such as Fiji, Mauritius and Trinidad.

Power relations of domination by the ‘white’ Europeans in colonial and imperial settings in Asia and Africa throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century has also left its mark (Fredrickson, 1981). Within the British context, many South Asians were brought over to the UK employed as servants and ayahs (nannies) by rich aristocrats during the eighteenth century. These historical movements have in some way contributed to the racist ideology of ‘white supremacy’ and Africans and Asians as somewhat inferior and subordinate – an accessory, a “*status symbol*” to the rich and powerful (Visram, 1993: 169).

Although hugely discredited by modern genetic research (Fryer, 1988: 61), this eighteenth century European scientific notion of race essentially suggested that ‘races’ embodied a “*package of fixed physical and mental traits whose permanence could only be eroded by*

mixture with other stocks” (Biddiss, 1979: 11). The whiter you are, the ‘purer’ you were as a race. Skin colour and biology, therefore, denoted social ranked positions of superiority and inferiority (Horsman, 1981).

It must be noted that racist ideas are seldom a matter of innocent errors. They are sometimes used as powerful ideological tools to promote the economic and political interests of particular social groups. For example, the benevolence (Mackenzie, 1984; 1986) of the ‘white mans burden’ (Jordan, 1974; Easterly, 2007) in civilising the world disguised the considerable material and financial benefits for the British Empire especially the rich, powerful and the middle class (Lorimer, 1978). Therefore, the emergence of the language of race and the process of economic expansion and capitalist development went hand in hand and was not merely a coincidence (Jordan, 1968; Williams, 1944). Thus, the racialisation of people around the world became intertwined with the new patterns of economic and social exploitation in Asia and Africa.

Although entirely different historical epochs with their own unique patterns of socio-political complexities and different manifestations of racism, it was the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, the ‘Age of Discovery’ during which Europeans engaged in intense exploration of the world in search of alternative trade routes, and also European colonialism (Said, 1979) in particular, which contributed to the development of European images of Africans and ‘other’ coloured people within an inferior and subordinate framework (Jordan, 1968; Wolf, 1982; Cox, 1970[1948]: 393; Lorimer, 1978). It is noted that not all Europeans who either established direct contact with the people from Africa, the Americas, Asia and Oceania or read reports sent back from explorers viewed them as inferior and barbaric. For example, one of the most influential writers of the French Renaissance Michel de Montaigne ([1580] Payne & Hunter,

2003: 473-480) began a long tradition of using what he referred to as the 'natural' and humane habits and lifestyles of non-European people as a basis for engaging in a critique of his own culture, romanticising in the process, the oxymoronic concept of the 'noble savage'.

However, the majority of contacts with non-Europeans resulted in unequal systems of relations, trade and power. By coming into contact with people who were 'different', who eat, dressed and lived differently, the colonial powers helped shape notions of the 'other'. This complex political, psychological and historical concept of 'othering' has been examined by many prominent theorists (Mannoni, 1964; Fanon, 1967; Said, 1979) and involves a process where a body of people are constructed and reduced to be "*less than what they are*" (Ameli & Merali, 2006: 33; Holiday et al, 2004). Critical studies into the process of colonisation and its impact on the colonised people of Africa and Asia, in particular, have highlighted the role of racialised stereotypical images of the colonised people which enhanced the 'differences' between coloniser and colonised and also played a central role in the colonial discourse popularised in British society (Pratt, 1992; Parry, 1998). Furthermore, Gilman (1991: 20) has highlighted how the words 'black people' and 'primitive' became synonymous during the colonial discourse (Parker et al, 1992). The rhetoric of coloniser v colonised, powerful v powerless, civilised v uncivilised, modern v backwards, educator v educated, amongst others, helped reshape, redefine and institutionalise class, gender and race relations between the white colonial people and the black people from the 'dark continents' of Africa and Asia (Mudimbe, 1994).

Although there are numerous examples of politically correct middle and upper classes engaging in anti-racist actions in post-war Britain (such as the united effort against the National Front in East London in the 1970/ 80s), it is argued that racist ideas (old and new)

are grounded in dominant and ‘hegemonic’ ideology (Gramsci, 1973) and mediated upon the masses through capital expansion, through ideas, through popular culture, almost to an extent that these ideas of the powerful minority become part of society’s norms and values. Arguably, the subsequent paternal and racialised attitudes and the politics of ‘difference’ that prevailed from the colonial experience still plays a major role in modern day society. This is why the discussion of race, history and colonialism is central to the contemporary story of the third generation Bangladeshis from East London.

The legacy of colonialism, decolonisation and the subsequent immigration patterns that followed has witnessed visible multi-racial and poly-ethnic communities across European societies (Ballard, 1994: 1). This has resulted in much antagonism and conflict between indigenous and newly arrived immigrant communities resulting in the development of scholarly thought which examine the reasons as to why racism permeates contemporary society. American sociologist Robert Park takes a more social psychological approach in his analysis of race. Park (1950) argues that the development of racial categories is related to individual needs, such as the need for recognition, esteem and identity. Parks (1950: 81) argues that:

“Race relations... are the relations existing between peoples distinguished by marks of racial descent, particularly when these racial differences enter into the consciousness of the individuals and groups so distinguished, and by so doing determine in each case the individual’s conception of himself as well as his status in the community..... Race consciousness ... enforces social distances”

Sociologist John Rex examined further the ‘race relations problematic’ first discussed by Michael Banton in his book *Race Relations* in 1967. From a structuralist perspective, John Rex ([1970]1983) argues that race relations are essentially ‘social relations’ which are

encouraged by the existence of certain structural conditions in predominantly urban centres: conflict over scarce resources, harsh class exploitation, inter-group distinctions and rivalry, differential access to power and prestige, cultural diversity and limited group interaction, migrant labour as an ‘underclass’ fulfilling stigmatised roles in urban centres. It is these structural conditions in modern society which help “*produce a racially structured social reality*” (Solomos and Back, 2000: 5).

Miles (1984; 1989) assertion that racism is exerted within a context of class differentiation is the main element of his critique of the structuralist approach of Banton (1967) and Rex (1983 [1970]). Miles argues that it is not the structural conditions of modern society which contributes to racist ideology. Human beings, especially those in positions of power, argues Miles, have constructed a theory of race which ultimately benefits them. Race is thus a “*human construct*” which contributes to the reproduction of class relations based on capital accumulation and class exploitation. Race as a human and political construct was an ideology steeped in regulatory power within society. Race is thus an ideological effect, a mask that hides real economic relationships (Miles, 1984). Miles concludes that the real issues of class consciousness shaped by economic relations are hidden within the racialisation/ race relations discourse.

Mile’s Marxist approach, however, has been criticised by many theorists for its class determinism. Goldberg (1992) argues that in some societies and contexts class exploitation may just be incidental in its relationship with racial dominance. It is not always the case that the bourgeoisie will be white and powerful and the proletariat will be powerless and black. The emergence of India and China as global economic powers in recent times adds weight to Goldberg’s argument. However, Mile’s (1989: 70) assertion that:

“the facts of biological differentiation are secondary to the meanings that are attributed to them”

is an important concept for many third generation Bangladeshis from Tower Hamlets. Certain social meanings are attributed to certain groups on the basis of biology and ‘difference’. It is this discussion that this chapter moves onto next.

7.2 A ‘Cultural’ Racism

Racial differences in the ‘physical and biological sense’ have little explanatory values for social scientists. There is no need to refer to biological differences in order to understand socially constructed race relations. These relations are shaped by ‘social’ factors. The physical features of race are not important in themselves. They only enter into social life only if people ‘think’ that biology is important and thus act on their belief. This is why social scientists are more interested in the social meanings of race (Banton, 1979). Both Banton (1979) and Miles (1982) use the term “*racialisation*” to describe the way people ‘frame’ the social world in racial terms. People construct racial categories which they then impose on their own and other groups, thus feeding into racial stereotypes. They use physical appearances and cultural stereotypes to mark out social boundaries between groups. Race, above all, argues Miles (1989: 75) is a ‘political construct’ and has contributed to those “*instances where social relations between people have been structured by the signification of human biological characteristics in such a way as to define and construct differentiated social collectives*”.

It is from this *racialisation* of the social world that racism as a concept emerges. Racism as an ideology of racial domination of one group over another is rooted in the belief that a designated racial group is either biologically or culturally inferior which in turn rationalises the inferior group’s treatment and social position in society (Wilson, 1973). It is my argument

that the politics of this very racism suggested by Wilson is at the heart of the third generation experience of displacement, rejection and “*outgroup*” (Hagendoorn, 1993) status.

The contribution by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies Group (CCCS) has enhanced our knowledge of these concepts of ‘race’ and ‘racialisation’. Concerned with the important sociological questions of power and inequality in society, the CCCS group contested that race as a concept was not a static entity. Race can be and is a vehicle for social and political action, and it can also contribute to a sense of community and solidarity. Furthermore the meaning of race as a social construction is contested and fought over and the political meaning of ‘black’ means different things to different people (Gilroy, 1987). One of the key thinkers associated with the CCCS, Paul Gilroy (1987: 236), suggested that the politics of race can actually be used as a vehicle for social action especially as a political colour of opposition. In this respect, Gilroy is critical of Miles’s (1989) class reductionism as he suggests that racial identities and movements are social, political and powerful and should remain relatively independent from class relations although he does acknowledge that there is a ‘separate yet connected’ logic between class and race (refer also to Hall, 1980: 34).

If race is an open arena for people of minority backgrounds and means different things to different people, if race mobilises people and denotes a sense of community and solidarity and if race can be a vehicle for social and political action and opposition, it is my contention that the same principles can be applied to the religion of Islam in the modern context for many third generation Bangladeshis. Like race, the religion of Islam is also an evolving set of ideas and provides power, identity and meaning to the respondents. This is discussed further in the next chapter.

And it is this ‘cultural’ form of racism which we move onto next. The question of cultural production and its relationship with ‘race’ which in turn informs the politics of identity have re-emerged as a point of conceptual debate in recent years. Cultural ‘difference’ as a concept was important for some of the respondents and set them apart from ‘others’ in society. As Sanjida states:

“We are different to other local Chinese and white families.... err, we look different, smell different, eat different foods, have different values and habits... it doesn’t really affect us ... when you like grow up with your own culture and with so many of your own ... and then you suddenly go to a different place, its kinda weird”

“We eat with our hands, watch Bollywood movies, don’t drink alcohol, eat halal food... we are different to other people” (Zeyba)

Both Sanjida and Zeyba are engaging in the politics of ‘Them’ Vs ‘Us’ (Hoque, 2004c) based on cultural differences. If we take Raymond Williams (1961: 43) ‘social’ definition of culture as a starting point, *“culture is a description of a particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behaviour”*, then the Bangladeshi ‘way of life’ is different from the mainstream British ‘way of life’. Therefore, not only are they different biologically, but they are also different culturally. The Bangladeshi ‘way of life’ as a threat to the mythic British ‘way of life’ (Barker, 1981) argument is developed further in a critical discussion of the concept of Britishness in chapter nine. This difference in cultural attitudes is summed up by Akbar:

“There are lots of things we do differently to white British people. Like, arranged marriages, our cultural dress, my mum eating beetlenuts... I spoke to this American guy the other day on instant messenger and he just could not understand why I am happy for my mum to arrange my marriage. To me, it’s normal”

This process of reclaiming culture as a marker of difference and as a separate way of life must be intertwined with how racism is conceptualised. Moreover, this syncretism of race theory with the re-emergence of culture as a social and political force has seen the emergence of ‘cultural racism’ as an explanatory tool (Fanon, 1967; Goldberg, 1993: 70-74). This type of racism, I argue, is the most common type of racism exercised on a day to day basis in modern day society. Cultural racism refers to cultural attitudes, beliefs and ideologies which are based on often mistaken notions about ‘racial’ groups (Richardson & Lambert, 1985). In other words, it can be regarded as a cultural form of prejudice. Prejudice is a style of thinking which relies heavily on stereotypes which are sweeping generalisations that are highly selective, over simplified and based on historical and contemporary media images. These stereotypes are usually factually incorrect, exaggerated or distorted and this is why prejudice is unfair – it not only prejudices people, it also ‘misjudges’ them.

Although there are important issues of ‘whiteness’, ‘power’ and “*race privilege*” involved (Dyer, 1993; Hill, 1997), it is incorrect to argue that only the “*white man*” is capable of cultural racism as many of the participants of this study are suggesting. It is also equally reductive to suggest that all white people are racist towards people of minority ethnic origin. The equation of ‘whiteness’ and racism are not co-existent. There is, for example, a rich history of white resistance to racism in the East End of London which includes the Battle of Cable Street (1936) where white working class people stood against Mosley’s anti-semitic fascists. There is also the example of the Anti Nazi League in the 1970s which consisted of mainly white youth who resisted the National Front (Renton, 2006). Furthermore, I argue that some of the respondents in this study such as Zeyba, Saeed, Akbar and Sanjida, in particular, are also culturally racist towards the “*white man*” as their opinions are based on prejudices, stereotypes and sweeping generalisations. For example, not all white people “*drink alcohol*”

and not all white women are sexually promiscuous as Zeyba implies. Similarly, not all Bangladeshis eat with their “hands” and not all white people eat with “knives and forks” as Sanjida suggests. There are many socio-political complexities involved.

I probed such an argument further with one of the respondents:

Me: *“you seem very angry and bitter towards what you call the ‘white man’*

Saeed: *“that’s because they are racist. They don’t like us”*

Me: *“what do you mean by ‘us’?”*

Saeed: *“you know, ‘us’ [pause] you, me, my breadwins [friends] in the next room [of the youth club]
[pause]*

You know, us, Bangladeshis, Muslims [pause] basically anyone who is not white”

Me: *“that’s a very broad statement to make. Not all ‘white people’ are racist. Some of my closest friends are ‘white’ and they are not racist. Err, they are always around my house, eating my food, respecting my culture and my parents. Not all ‘white people’ are racist. That’s a very generalised statement to make”
[pause]*

Saeed: *“you’ve obviously lived a different life to me. In my world and from my experience, the white people I know are racist”*

The above extract highlights the importance of history and life experiences which are highly individualised, subjective and context specific. These experiences also shape our ideology and we react to our ‘own’ histories. Furthermore, I have been presented both as an ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ by Saeed in the above interview extract. One moment I am part of the “Bangladeshi, Muslim... us” and upon questioning Saeed’s claim that “white people” are “racist”, I have also been distanced as somebody who has lived a “different life” to Saeed, not part of ‘his [“my”] “world”.

Racial prejudices are not something that simply derive from a vacuum. Rather, they are part of the cultural heritage of the society and these prejudices are transmitted across generations. People are exposed to these attitudes and beliefs from an early age and the danger then becomes that these prejudiced beliefs can easily start to become part of the ‘norms’ of society. As Goldberg (1993:1) argues:

*“racial thinking and racist articulation have become increasingly normalised
And naturalised throughout modernity”*

A discussion of what is considered ‘normal’ is entwined with notions of ‘whiteness’. Increasingly, the question of what it means to be part of the ‘white’ majority (‘Us’) is not in need of definition especially in contemporary popular culture. In his discussion of whiteness in film and other cultural representations, Dyer (1993: 126-148) has argued that whiteness is equated with normality. Hill (1997: 3) argues that whiteness should also be seen within the context of *“power and banality of race privilege”*. Furthermore, the concept of whiteness should be contextualised within the historical framework of ‘white supremacy’. Therefore, if the arguments of Dyer and Hill suggest that normalisation, power and privilege is associated with whiteness, it then means that the opposite is true for people of colour. It can be argued that not only do people of minority background suffer from discrimination, alienation and marginality from social life, but in some extreme cases they can be even considered as being *“invisible”* (Ellison, R (1965[1952])). The ideals associated with ‘whiteness’ reinforce notions of superiority/ inferiority based on race, history and culture.

As demonstrated in the quotes above, many third generation Bangladeshis such as Akbar, Sanjida and Zeyba are not biologically inferior, rather they are ‘culturally different’ from mainstream British society. Their way of life revolves around religion, dress, diet, values,

rituals and symbols which are both different from mainstream society and often carry with them prejudices that have been the product of racialised stereotypes and images stemming from imperial and colonial Britain. This way of life marks them out as ‘different’ and also as outsiders and as a minority. There is also a sense of *cultural pathology* (Shain, 2003) as it is implicit that there is something inherently inferior in the cultural and familial background of those people from minority groups. This notion of difference also problematises minority groups and positions them in an unequal relationship of inferiority to the white population (Shain, 2003: 2).

Furthermore, it was in the 1970s and 80s that the role and position of the ‘ethnic minority’ (Jeffcoate, 1984; Bulmer & Solomos, 1999; Cornell & Hartmann, 1998: 21) in British society started to be debated within political and social life. Using the murder of Stephen Lawrence in London in 1993 as a case in point, Hewitt (2005) has highlighted how there was a “*white backlash*” against the perceived equalities and multiculturalist practices of the local councils and other local agencies towards people of minority background. There was a perception that ethnic minorities were receiving too many privileges. Whilst the political and social undertone was one of poverty, unemployment and a fight for scarce resources, cultural racist attitudes, once again, became entangled with notions of patriotism and nationhood. The racist taunt aimed at Sanjida, Taiba and Zeyba to go “*back home*” is rooted within this political environment.

Attitudes of cultural racism are still rife in contemporary society. For example, the recent Big Brother racism debate (2007) involving the Bollywood superstar Shilpa Shetty, Jade Goody, Dannielle Llyod and Jo O’Meara, the Strictly Come Dancing “*paki*” controversy of 2009 (Littlejohn, 2009) and Prince Harry describing an Asian member of his platoon as “*our little*

paki friend".⁴⁰ Jade used the words "*Shilpa Poppadom*" (Simpson, 2007) to describe her housemate whilst Dannielle thought that Shilpa should "*fuck off home*" (Curtis, 2007). The reference to a 'different' food item and a reference that home is anywhere but the UK reminds Shilpa that she is 'different' *culturally* and that she is not part of what it means to be British.

This notion of cultural racism highlights a growing trend for academics in the contemporary era to not view racism as a monolith based on biological inferiority, but rather, race and racism has many components and is entwined with notions of class, gender, nationhood, nationality, culture and ethnicity (Goldberg, 1993: 69-80). We should therefore not be talking about "*racism*" but "*racisms*" (Goldberg, 1993: 97-111). The continuum, however, despite the shift in discourse from biology to "*new*" cultural forms of racisms (Barker, 1981), has been the concept of 'difference'. Shain (2003) argues that often these differences are based on misconceptions which obscure the role of racism and representation in the lives of many South Asian girls and diverts attention away from wider questions of social justice and equality. In media and literature, Asian men have been characterised as dominant, violent and controlling whilst Asian women have been depicted as passive, timid, obedient and shy. Shain's study of forty four Asian girls at a Manchester school challenged the popular images of Asian women. She found that they resisted the various types of cultural stereotypes aimed towards them at school and were anything but shy and passive. Sanjida mirrors this post structuralist feminist approach to race and gender.⁴¹

⁴⁰ <http://news.bbc.news.co.uk>, 11/1/09

⁴¹ For a more comprehensive discussion on the limitations of mainstream feminism in relation to the question of race, refer to hooks, 1981

“My art teacher once asked me if my father allowed my mother to ‘go out’? I laughed and replied, ‘she has a job and earns more money than my dad’. You should have seen my teachers face [laughing]”

In the context of many third generation Bangladeshis from Tower Hamlets, this politics of difference, accelerated by their overtly Islamic identity (discussed in the next chapter), is pushing many to become involved in the ‘Us’ v ‘Them’ political discourse. Central to this discourse is the idea that race, religion, culture denotes nation and nationalism which informs the deeply psychological logic of belonging. They are not part of the British nation as they are part of a different race *culturally* and also now part of a supposedly Islamic religion which also poses a threat to the mythic ‘British way of life’.

7.3 We are “*here to stay*”: revolt and resistance – a short history of race and racism in East London

This part of the chapter locates the multiple and complex identities of the participants of this study within a racialised history of the East End. I argue that without an understanding of the historical context of East London, it is unlikely that we shall be able to fully come to terms with the important role of race and racism in the lives of Bangladeshis in the contemporary period.

Not only have minority ethnic populations grown rapidly over the post-war period, they are heavily concentrated in inner urban neighbourhoods, most often the poorer, more run-down areas of cities and towns from which the white population has increasingly moved out (SEU, 2000). There are fewer resources and there is competition for jobs, space and housing in areas such as the East End of London. This competition can be intense and can lead to tensions between people whose sense of community is tested because of different community roots, distinct racial and ethnic backgrounds but all of whom share the same space (Mumford &

Power 2003: 57). Philips (1988) has also indicated that the East End as an area has witnessed periodic organised fascist activity mainly because of this conflict over scarce public resources in particular housing, education and jobs. As such there has been some violent resistance to successive minority groups moving into the area because of this competition for scarce resources.

Moreover, this notion of riots and resistance involving ethnic minorities is not limited to East London as illustrated by the Notting Hill riots of 1958 (Panayi, 1996: 15-16) and the Brixton and Tottenham riots of the 1980s (Solomos, 1993: 147-179). However, it is important to note that despite sporadic periods of fascist activity and violent resistance in the East End, Begum and Eade (2005: 181) argue that Tower Hamlets, on the whole, is a good example of a multi-ethnic neighbourhood where diversity, difference and inter-group conflict and rivalry over limited resources has not resulted in far-reaching social unrest in recent history.

In a recent study of 100 families from the East End of London, Katharine Mumford and Anne Power (2003) examined the roles of community and family life. A major part of their research examined the notion of 'race' within multi-ethnic neighbourhoods. Some of the quotes from their respondents highlight the culture and attitude of racism that still exists among East Enders, in particular, the white community:

"Vast change. It's more of a multi-cultural area now. Whereas at first it was white-dominated. You've got all kinds round here now" (Louise, p 57)

"I don't like it. It should be mixed. When someone moves, you never see a white family come in. It's all changing to black" (Naomi, p67)

“I’ve got nothing against them being with coloured [friends], as long as they keep to their own with partners – blacks with blacks, whites with whites” (Sonia, p69)

“Racism is everywhere because no one wants different people to come and live in their country. They think we are a problem” (Kerim, p73)

It is this last quote from Turkish immigrant Kerim that strikes a chord with the experiences of the third generation Bangladeshis. The attitudes of racism and the “*critical gaze*” (Morrison, 1992: 90) experienced by the six participants of this study are mirrored in the quotes above. Like their grandparents and parents, these feelings of ‘difference’, as Kerim highlights, have become an everyday experience for many third generation Bangladeshis. As Akbar states, “*many of my teachers have labeled me as not able because they have certain expectations from people of colour*”. This feeling of difference and these attitudes are even more surprising considering that Tower Hamlets has a very ethnically diverse population. It is “*normal*” argues Panayi (2003: 67-71) to see non-white people in London. The 2001 census, for example, highlighted that 58% of the population in Tower Hamlets belonged to an ethnic group other than White British of which a third or 33% of the population were Bangladeshi and 7% came from African/Caribbean backgrounds.⁴²

These examples of contemporary racism and racist attitudes illustrated above in the study by Mumford and Power (2003) and in the personal stories as told by the participants of this study are rooted in local history. For over four hundred years, the East End has become a refuge to wave after wave of immigrants such as the French Huguenots, the Jews and the Bangladeshis who settled in mass numbers from the 1950s (Thornton, 1983). Whilst diverse in their cultural and religious backgrounds, all three of these groups have one thing in common – they all experienced resistance from extreme elements of the established white communities (Bhatia, 2006). In examining the racial history of the East End, I would like to

⁴² Census, 2001, www.ons.gov.uk

use two case studies of how racism towards the Bangladeshi community has had a dual effect of reminding the Bangladeshis of their ‘difference’ (as a separate and distinct ethnic and racial group) and also galvanising the community to unite and exert their Bangladeshi identity which is now being slowly challenged by the emergence of the religion of Islam as a social mobilising force. The two examples are of the murder of Altab Ali in 1978 and the racially motivated attack on seventeen year old Quddus Ali in 1993.

Altab Ali (1978)

Altab Ali was found murdered on the streets of Whitechapel on May the 4th 1978 (Jorda, 1978). This murder was symptomatic of the atmosphere of racial antagonism that had been stirred up in the 1970s by extreme white supremacist groups such as the British National Party (BNP) and the National Front (NF) both of whom engaged in a systematic pattern of violence against the Bangladeshis and who advocated slogans such as “*Blacks Out*” and “*White is Right*” (Power, 1979). Not only were the Bangladeshis physically fighting against overt racism from the BNP and NF, but there were many reports of more institutionalised and subtle variations of racism from the local police (Murphy, 1978). The reaction from the Bangladeshi community was strong and organised. Rex (1979) has referred to this organised resistance as the “*politics of defensive confrontation*”. In what became known as ‘Black Monday’ (Duke & Brett, 1978) the Bangladeshis teamed up with the Socialist Party and the Trade Unions and engaged in mass demonstrations and strikes (Fernandes, 1978; Sivanandan, 1983). Activist Jalal Uddin (1979) from the Bangladeshi Youth Movement for Equal Rights summed up the mood of revolt and discontent in the late 1970s:

“In 1978 we found that the only way we could be effective against racial attacks and intimidation was to organise ourselves. Since the murder of Altab Ali we have taken up wider issues that effect our lives. We have now become more aware of institutionalised racism. As citizens of Tower Hamlets

we see the need to be constructively involved in every aspect of the community. Increasingly we are fighting institutionalised racism in order to achieve equality, as part of our human rights in this country. We are here to stay.”

Uddin’s final words are pertinent to this debate. “*We are here to stay*” were words not only of defiance against the extreme elements of white society but also a statement to British society as a whole announcing the Bangladeshis arrival not only as a physical but also a ‘political’ community which wanted a place, position and voice in society. Thus, in reaction to slogans such as “*Blacks Out*”, the Bangladeshis shouted back “*come what May, we’re here to stay*”. Slogans such as these, argues Masani (1979: 8), “*symbolised the rejection by youth of their elders preference for peace at all costs and their assertion of a new determination to fight for their rights*”.

Quddus Ali (1993)

The “*new racisms*” (Barker, 1981), whether in its various guises of classical, symbolic, aversive (Hagendoorn, 1993: 28-29) or institutional continued against the Bangladeshi community in the 1980s. These racisms, I argue, continued to mobilise the Bangladeshi community and repeatedly reinforced the notion of ‘them’ v ‘us’ and ‘difference’. Described by the Revd Kenneth Leech from Aldgate as a “*Civil War*” (Leech, 1993) between the white and Bangladeshi communities of the East End, the racial tensions were further heightened by the vicious attack by eight white youths on seventeen year old Bangladeshi student Quddus Ali in Stepney in 1993 (East London Advertiser, 16/9/93). Quddus Ali was left fighting for his life and this incident once again reminded the now established Bangladeshi community of their ‘difference’ as a racial community. This notion of racial ‘difference’, feelings of displacement and non-belonging was powerfully illustrated by one of Ali’s friend (Mackinnon, 1993):

“[Quddus’s] only mistake was that he was black”

My own experience of growing up in Bethnal Green in the mid 1980s (refer to chapter one of this study) echoes the culture of fear that was present during the time of Quddus Ali’s attack. Studies have repeatedly shown that Bangladeshis and Somalians were most likely to be the victims of estate based racially motivated violent crimes in the 90s. Many people of minority backgrounds became *“prisoners in the own homes”* (Sampson & Phillips, 1992: 9). This was a normalised fact of life for many Bangladeshis. Growing up in Tower Hamlets, I still remember the incidents of being chased by the pit-bull (set upon us by the ‘white boys’) within the concrete football pitches of Bethnal Green and having to run home after the local ‘white’ boys ganged up on me.

I find it useful to discuss and fuse the local history of racism and my own experience of feeling like a second-class citizen in the context of this research. Whilst the racism present in the year 2010 is not the same as the physical and violent clashes of the 1970s, 80s and 90s, the experience of feeling ‘different’ and alienated has still remained a continuum for many third generation Bangladeshis. As Kimber and Cooper (1991) argue, it is the continual *“threat”* of harassment and violence which contributes to a sense of fear and risk even in the absence of direct racial attacks. Therefore, you cannot understand the complex notion of racial and ethnic identity for many third generation Bangladeshis without an understanding of local area history of struggle. As Azad states:

“My father used to always tell me about the racism he experienced when he first came here. He was genuinely frightened for his own life and for the safety of his family. [pause] He seriously considered going back”

It is because of these historical racialized struggles that race and the politics of ‘difference’ and ‘otherness’ are important components in the identity quest for many of the respondents of

this study. Furthermore, whilst the context may have changed, the “*new*” racisms encountered by the third generation, mainly on the premise of their religiously visible and ideological Islamic ‘differences’, still persists. In fact, racism is still a major problem in British society today. For example, there were a total of 7,430 racially aggravated cases in 2005, up 28 percent from the year before (Moussa, 2006). Also, as mentioned earlier, high profile incidents such as the Big Brother race row (2007) and the Strictly Come Dancing “*paki*” joke (2009) have illustrated that the colonial racist attitudes of old still permeates throughout some sections of contemporary British ‘white’ community. This suggests that racism, in what ever guise, is still a major fact of social life and there are still some “*racial hotspots*” throughout Britain (Harris, 2001).

Many second and third generation Bangladeshis have refused to accept the sort of treatment meted out to their parents and have actively either resisted through riots and demonstrations or through the seeking of alternative identities such as Br-Islam. Within the wider context of UK society, the politics of race and “*difference*” and its relationship with power (Goldberg, 1990: 296) and privilege has direct implications for Bangladeshi identity. I argue that if power cannot be sought within a linguistic, ethno-racial or cultural arena, then this quest for visibility, power and voice is being found in religion for many.

7.4 A world ‘beyond racism’

This chapter has located the experiences of racism of six third generation Bangladeshis from East London within a historical, theoretical and localised framework. History, global and local, has played a major role in the racialisation of the world in terms of a series of binary factors: black v white, outsider v insider, Bangladeshi v British and ‘us’ v ‘them’. Central within this discourse is the notion of ‘power’ which throughout history has been with either

the colonial merchants, the white extremist groups of the 1970s or within the confinements of institutional policing and politics. The Bangladeshis have continually attempted to readdress this imbalance of power through demonstrations in the 1970s and now through their Islamic sense of belonging which has its foundations in a global sense of brotherhood.

Albeit in different guises, the personal stories from the participants of this study illustrate the fact that the problem of the “*colour line*” still persists in contemporary society after nearly one hundred years since Du Bois (1989[1903]) made his prediction. The discourse, as Hall (1993) states, has changed from direct racism to one of ‘difference’ based on culture, religion, language and ethnicity. Feelings of alienation, rejection and second class citizenship have remained a continuum throughout the short fifty year history of Bangladeshi immigration into the United Kingdom. The future seems to be bleak as up to date Census Data rank Bangladeshis as underperforming in all areas of social life (education, employment, health, income and housing) (Babb, 2006: 2-7, 41-43). Therefore, poverty and socio-political marginalisation will remain areas of concern for the Bangladeshi community for the foreseeable future.

However, the new resolve found in the religion of Islam by many of the third generation Bangladeshis and the seeking of hybrid identities which seeks to accommodate notions of what it means to be “*British, Bangladeshi and Muslim*” (Zeyba) is creating a positive future for this marginalised group. Whilst the politics of ‘difference’ will remain within social and political discourse as the global ‘War on Terror’ intensifies and therefore continue to inform societal racial attitudes, many of the respondents have found a sense of power, belonging and acceptance in the religion of Islam as a reaction to localised experiences of racism and also as a rejection of mainstream “*white*” and alien Bangladeshi cultural values. It is this discussion

of the role of religion and the development of a Br-Islamic identity that this thesis moves onto next.

Chapter 8

The development of a Br-Islamic identity among the third generation Bangladeshis from East London (Tower Hamlets)

8.0 Introduction

This chapter examines the importance of Islam in the lives of the six participants of this study and situates their stories within the broader national and international socio-political framework. It is important to remember the socio-political context in which this thesis is being written as highlighted earlier in chapter two. Domestically, the context is one of increased hostility towards British Muslims especially since 9/11 and 7/7 (Modood, 2005: x; Githens-Mazer & Lambert, 2010). It is a context where British Muslims:

- are some of the most socially and economically marginalised communities in Britain (Babb et al, 2006);
- are no longer depicted as hard working, respectful and law abiding but rather viewed as a “*problem group*” (Alexander, 2006: 258) and have become portrayed as active participants of street riots (Amin, 2003);
- have become the target of subsequent negative media, state and societal responses (Bagguley & Hussain, 2005: 209-211).

It is also a context where there has been a history of exclusion of many Muslims, especially of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin, from British society along a racialised discourse (as discussed in the previous chapter). Initially, this exclusion was based around issues of skin

colour and now upon a seemingly backward, oppositional, anti-modern, un-British and culturally 'different' Islamic culture which has witnessed the emergence of a 'new' type of racism (Shain, 2003; Barker, 1981).

Internationally, the context is one of increasing tensions around the globe involving Muslim countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. It is also a context where British born third generation Bangladeshis are negotiating their national, ethnic and religious identities in a post 9/11 and 7/7 world. Most importantly, it is a national and international context where religion as well as race, gender, nationality and ethnicity have become an important component of an individual identity (Lewis, 2002). It is within this socio-political context that the complex and multiple identities of the six participants of this study are being disseminated and analysed within the broader academic debate of what it means to be a 'British Muslim' (Lewis, 2007; Abbas, 2005).

Islam, for many, helps negate the complexities and multiplicity of identities of being British (born), Bangladeshi (ethno-racial) and Muslim (religious). This notion of an all encompassing European Islamic identity is forwarded by the Swiss academic Ramadan (2004) who contests that he is 'Muslim by religion, Swiss by nationality, European by culture, Egyptian by memory and universalist by principle'. The central argument which this thesis propagates is that a new positive British Bangladeshi Muslim identity (Br-Islam) has emerged within East London. **Br-Islam, as a definition, is a dynamic culture which enables the third generation Bangladeshis to comfortably identify with and fuse the many segments of their multifaceted and complex identities together (national, linguistic, ethnic, racial, cultural, religious and gender).**

This chapter is not intended as a primer on Islam and I am aware that some issues have been ignored altogether. This chapter is organised into seven sections:

- The first part of this chapter locates the personal voices and struggles of the six participants within the wider debate of what it means to be a British Bangladeshi Muslim;
- The second part examines the complexity of ‘identity’;
- The third section outlines some of the socio-political explanations as to why Islam has increased in national and global popularity;
- The fourth part of this chapter analyses the question of what the religion of Islam provides its members;
- The fifth section examines the emergence and components of the ‘Br-Islamic’ identity and culture;
- The sixth section of this chapter provides some empirical evidence which suggests that there is sufficient institutional and ideological support available for this Br-Islamic culture to prosper, develop and be sustained;
- The final section of this chapter analyses the complex relationship between the ‘Br-Islamic’ identity and Western capitalistic culture.

8.1 What does it mean to be a British Bangladeshi Muslim

Islam as a socio-political, cultural and spiritual force was evident in the lives of all the respondents. All six participants were born into the religion of Islam and therefore it can be argued they were Muslims more by cultural habit and birth rather than choice. The national Bangladeshi population are a religiously homogeneous community with approximately 92.5% of the total number of Bangladeshis in Britain (283,000) in 2001 defining themselves as Muslims (Census 2001 [ONS 2004]; Peach, 2005: 22-24). Whilst it is simplistic to categorise as often there is overlap (Kamrava, 2006: 13-16), I argue that the interpretation of Islam for all of the respondents can be broadly termed as either ‘cultural’ or ‘politicised’. There are other key manifestations of British Islam around Tower Hamlets and the rest of the country such as devout conservative religious Islam, spiritual Islam (Vervotec, 1998: 101),

radical Islam (Abbas, 2007; McRoy, 2006) and reformist/ modern Islam (Kamrava, 2006) which is mainly an arena of the educated and professional class. The many faces and diversity of British Islam has already been discussed earlier in the thesis in chapter two.

The ideological and practical outlook for the respondents was governed by a ‘cultural’ Islam (a way of life) that they were born into and a politicised Islam exerted as a response to social marginalisation in a post 9/11 and 7/7 world. It is important to make a distinction between the rise of *political* Islam within the Muslim world and the *politicised* third generation Bangladeshi from Tower Hamlets. Underpinned by the radical philosophies of Islamic thinkers such as Qutb, Mawdudi and Khomeini (Kepel, 2003: 30-42), *political* Islam has developed largely as a response to despotic regimes and an American backed imperialism in the Islamic world and is governed by terrorist violence, military coups and revolutions (Kepel, 2003; Lewis, 2004; Ali, 2003; Anderson, 1997).

The *politicised* third generation Bangladeshi from Tower Hamlets, on the other hand, is frustrated and angry with local issues of marginalisation and a perceived sense of injustice. They are less governed, I argue, with a call to violent action and more by a membership to a symbolic Islam which provides them with a sense of acceptance, belonging and recognition and makes them visible in wider society. This visibility in society has been accelerated in recent years by the involvement of many British Muslims in the Anti-War movement which has resulted in many younger Muslims entering into local and national politics (Yaqoob, 2007).

Modood (2005: x) argues that the revival of Islam for many British Muslims is a direct result of years of misrecognition of their identity. Becoming a British Muslim, or exerting it as an

important part of your identity, therefore is both a politicised act and is also part of an “*equality seeking movement*” (Modood, 2005: x) and should be viewed within the politics of ‘recognition’ (Taylor, 1994). For a minority, however, an Islamic identity goes beyond an “*equality seeking movement*” and represents a ‘superiority seeking’ movement against non-Muslims.

Whether ‘cultural’ or ‘politicised’, Islam for all six respondents has involved both a defence and a reaffirmation of it. The importance of Islam is evident for all six respondents:

“Along with my Bangladeshi heritage, my religion [Islam] is also important to me. These are two important parts of my identity. These are parts of who I am” (Sanjida)

“We are Muslims. That is our main identity. Everything else does not matter as much... I have made a lot of mistakes in the past... taken drugs, run away from home and upset my parents. I have found out more about my religion just by reading lots of books and speaking to my friends. I want to, inshallah, become a better Muslim and a better human being” (Taiba)

“I am a Muslim. That is the way I view myself and the way I want others to view me as” (Saeed)

“I wear the hijab to school, when I go round my cousins and when I am out with my friends. It was weird wearing it at first. Now, it feels normal and I would feel weird if I don’t have the hijab on” (Zeyba)

“I do not have any connection with my Bangladeshi roots. I prefer to be known as a Muslim than a Bengali” (Azad)

“It’s in my culture to be a Muslim... I am a Muslim Bengali boy – that’s it” (Akbar)

Storry and Childs (2002: 251) note that the practice of Islam and the heritage of Asian culture has become inextricably intertwined especially for the first generation. Whilst culture as a concept remains ambiguous (Wallerstein, 1991), complex (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1963; Tylor, 1930), fluid and multiple (Clifford, 1988), I subscribe to Williams (1980) and Inglis's (2005) definition of culture as a 'whole way of life'. Culture is therefore viewed as "*all ways of thinking, understanding, feeling, believing and acting 'characteristic' of a particular group*" (Williams, 1980:6-7). Like the first generation of settlers described by Storry and Childs (2002) above, I argue that Islam and Bangladeshi culture has also become inextricably intertwined for many third generation Bangladeshis in such a way that it has become difficult to separate Islamic and Bangladeshi cultural traditions. They have fused into one cultural 'way of life' where its members think, understand, feel, believe and act in a particular way. The main difference between the generational exertion of this 'whole' culture is that there are more variables and complexities for the third generation to consider in their way of life. Along with Bangladeshi culture, they have also had to fuse elements of their British born identity with a post 9/11 and 7/7 politicised Islam.

It was natural, I argue, for Akbar and Sanjida to be both Bangladeshi and Islamic as being a Muslim is an important part of everyday Bangladeshi "*culture*". Islam and the many symbolisms associated with the religion such as the hijab was also "*normal*" and "*important*" to some of the participants (Zeyba, Sanjida, Saeed, Azad). For Taiba, Islam was her "*main identity*". This reiterates the argument that as the majority of third generation Bangladeshis are born into the religion of Islam, being spirituality devoted to the religion is somewhat 'normal' and 'natural' for most. They are 'culturally' Muslim.

Being a Muslim is a vital component of being a Bangladeshi from Sylhet where everyday life revolves around Islamic rituals and traditions. 90% of the approximate 145 million Bangladeshis from Bangladesh are Muslims.⁴³ This religious and cultural homogeneity reinforces a sense of oneness and community in Bangladesh which is also evident in Tower Hamlets. I argue that the similarity in ideology, physical attributes (skin colour, dress) and habits (praying, diet) between many third generation Bangladeshis has contributed to the establishment of a 'Br-Islamic' identity. As Woodward (2004: 39) states:

"We present ourselves to others through everyday interactions, through the way we speak and dress, marking ourselves as the same as those with whom we share an identity and different from those with whom we do not"

It is the similarities which mark out 'differences' between 'us' and 'them'. This "social" identity (Jenkins, 1996) unites many Bangladeshi Muslims under a broad Bangladeshi Muslim culture.

8.2 A Multifaceted Br-Islamic Identity

Religious identities, like concepts of community and culture, are complex and far from being fixed, they are fluid, multiple, hybrid, syncretic and often contradictory. Cultural theorists such as Stuart Hall (1991) refute the biological determinism of identity as being static and fixed by behavioural psychologists such as Phinney & Rotheram (1987) and argue that social environment, historical change and the complexity of modernity and globalisation impact individual and group identities. I argue that the social environment for many third generation Bangladeshis centres around issues of deprivation and socio-political marginalisation, whilst the popularity of Islam as a local and global badge of identity in a post 9/11 and 7/7 world illustrates a period of historic change.

⁴³ <http://pewforum.org>, 2009: 5

These changes, along with socially constructed identities (Kearney, 2003) which take into account issues of ‘representation’ and ‘power’ and the role of ‘others’ on our own sense of identity (Hall, 1996: 4), have contributed to a multifaceted and fluid Br-Islamic identity. In modern complex British society, questions of identity have become less concerned with ‘who we are’ and more with ‘how have we been represented’. As Laclau (1990: 33) notes, certain identities hold more power than others such as white Vs black, man Vs woman. One identity is viewed as a ‘mark’ (ie; being black and being a woman) whilst the other identity (being a man and being white) is viewed as normal and ‘unmarked’. It is argued that in the context of this thesis, that being a Muslim in modern British society constitutes a ‘mark’ and the non-Muslim majority are viewed as normal and ‘unmarked’. Identities, therefore, emerge within the play of specific modalities of power and are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion (actual and symbolic) ‘from’ a group as opposed to membership ‘to’ a group (Bhabha, 1994; Hall, 1993b; Butler, 1993).

Furthermore, Bhabha (1995: 47) has suggested that the ideological discourses in the West has *“attempted to give a hegemonic “normality” to the uneven development and differential, often disadvantaged, histories of nations, races, communities and peoples”*. Hall (1996: 4) and others (Foucault, 1980; Butler, 1990) argue that it is only through the relation to the ‘other’, the representable, the symbolic, the relation to what it is not, that identity is constructed. Identities are consequently *“constructed through, not outside, difference”* (Hall, 1996: 4).

I argue that identification with Br-Islam for many third generation Bangladeshis is a social construction lodged in contingency and conditional on certain structural and symbolic

resources such as a seemingly antagonistic foreign policy towards Muslim countries, poverty, ideal of a global ‘umma’, sense of victimhood in an Islamophobic society (Runnymede Trust, 1997; Githens-Mazer & Lambert, 2010), shared characteristics in terms of clothing, diet and social habits, amongst others. It is important also to note that once Br-Islamic identification is secured, it does not obliterate “*difference*” amongst its members (Hall, 1996: 3). There are still ideological, cultural, gender and class differences despite a generic commitment to the ‘idea’ of Br-Islam. I argue that as the social environment, the conditions of existence and history changes, so will the identities of many third generation Bangladeshis. Identity, therefore, is always in process and never completed (Hall, 1996: 2-3).

Many third generation Bangladeshis are contesting what Kearney (2003) has termed their ‘postmodern identities’ which is diverse and open to change. Whilst preoccupied with personal ethnic, national and religious badges of identity, many of the respondents were at the same time politicised (especially Zeyba and Saeed). Often, as stated earlier, there is overlap between mainstream cultural Islam and politicised Islam (Kamrava, 2006). Kershner argues (1998: 2, 19; refer also to Hall, 1991; Butler, 1993: 105) that identities, including religious identities, are “*multifaceted and variable and is in a constant state of flux and can never be static... the boundaries of identity cannot be simply and clearly drawn... [it is] fuzzy and complex*”. I argue that the politicised Muslim has developed because of local and global events perceived as injustices against Muslims. Many have also, as Bhabha (1995: 48) terms it, “*suffered the sentence of history – subjugation, domination, diaspora and displacement*”. It is Islam which fills an identity void for many of the third generation Bangladeshis and gives them a sense of acceptance and belonging and also allows them to fight for social and economic justice.

Furthermore, Warner (1998) argues that religion often means more to people in diasporic communities away from home as an exertion of identity in an alien environment. It is both an assertion of an individual and personal identity as well as a public show to others of a chosen religious identity. This public show, argues Ahmed (2005), provides “*insulation*” against the “*isolation*” of migration and the hostilities experienced in the host society.

Unlike a person’s ethnic, racial or geographic origin, Bari (2002: 175) argues that religious identity is a matter of “*choice*”. In this sense, “*a Muslim or any other religious identity is dictated by one’s conscious acceptance of a way of life*”. Therefore, this Muslim identity in Tower Hamlets, argues Ahmed (2005: 200), is not “*only the way they identified themselves, but also the way that they wanted others to identify them*”. This notion that a Muslim identity is a “*conscious acceptance of a way of life*” is problematic. As I have argued earlier, most Bangladeshis have not ‘chosen’ to be a Muslim. Rather, they were born into the religion and it has become a normal part of their culture. Also, Taiba reminds us that it was her father who “*forced*” her to wear the headscarf in public. This does not correlate with the notion of free choice. Rather, it can be viewed as a form of social control.

Br-Islam is not a Saudi inspired deeply conservative Islam, but a forward thinking, progressive and reformist Islam which allows its members to take elements out of their Bangladeshi, Muslim and British born identities and fuse it with everyday urban traits of being an East Londoner. This is a skilful and complex process of what the American Islamic scholar Hamza Yusuf (2007) has termed as ‘discernment’. Yusuf presents an unproblematic notion of ‘Britishness’ by arguing that Islam allows for the expressions of local customs therefore a Scottish Muslim can still enjoy haggis, albeit from halal (‘permitted Islamically’, Maqsood, 2003: 53) ingredients. The purpose of Islam is not to obliterate local customs.

Many Muslims, he argues, may be ethnically Punjabi, but they are culturally British. Parents need to allow their children to take the best from both cultures and engage in what he calls ‘discernment’ (Yusuf quoted in Lewis, 2007: 36-39). Bhabha (1996: 54) contributes positively to Yusuf’s assertion by arguing that many postcolonial migrants have developed a culture which is “*in-between*” cultures. I argue that Br-Islam is ‘in-between’ Bangladeshi, British and Muslim cultures as it takes the best from all of its cultural influences and fuses them together (Basit, 1997).

There are clear examples of ‘discernment’ taking shape amongst the participants of this study. For instance, Akbar tells me of how his family celebrate Christmas every year with a ‘halal’ turkey, Sanjida tells me of how her family celebrate the new year every year by going to Tower Bridge to witness the fireworks display and Azad admits to “*going to the pub*” to watch football on large screen television and feeling comfortable consuming soft drinks throughout the game. Many have found a space for religious expression within their everyday lives. For example, Saeed invited me to watch him play for his local football team. The game coincided with the mid afternoon daily prayers. As a solution, Saeed and some of his team members prayed publically in the park during the half time interval of the football match.

8.3 Why has Islam increased in national and global popularity

This section of the chapter outlines some of the interdisciplinary theoretical explanations as to why Islam has increased in national and global popularity. The 2001 Census states that there are currently 1.6 million Muslims in the United Kingdom and the global Muslim population is currently estimated to be at 1.57 billion accounting for nearly a quarter of the total global population.⁴⁴ Furthermore, the large youth population of the British Muslim

⁴⁴ <http://pewforum.org>, 2009

community⁴⁵ means that a strong continued growth is expected in years to come and it is expected that the population figure for Muslims in Britain is likely to double to 3 million by 2021 (Lewis, 2007: 20).

An anthropological analysis of the growth of religion across the globe explains the attraction of religion, especially Islam, to individuals and communities in the millennium. Geertz (2000: 167-186) argues that religious identities have become more important and central to peoples lives and have taken on a political role in the developing world especially since decolonisation and since the end of the Cold War in 1989. Furthermore, increased global movement between people means that religious differences (rituals, ideology, customs) are immediate and obvious. As such, people have become more aware and open to religious influences. Other social systems such as socialism and nationalism have failed against the power of capitalism, thus giving rise to religion as an alternative social system. Geertz (2000: 176-178) notes that people are frustrated with the materialism, media and consumerism of the modern world and are searching (Hoque, 2006) for something more moral and more “*deeply rooted, closer to home ideas and values*”. Religion, is therefore, an expression of “*meaning, identity and power*”.

Adding to Geertz’s anthropological analysis, a sociological discussion forwarded by Akhtar (2005) also explains the current popularity of Islam. What Akhtar (2005: 164) terms “*religiosity*” (the visibility of Islam) has developed around the world due to two main factors. Firstly, the economic and social exclusion of the majority of Muslims in the West (Munoz, 1999) has been used to explain the growth of visible Islam. Muslims in Britain (discussed earlier in chapter two) live in abject poverty and within economically stagnant

⁴⁵ Muslims have the youngest age structure of all religious communities. Around 33% are aged between 0-15 compared to the national average of 20%, Lewis (2007: 19-20)

areas. Like the first generation of settlers, many British third generation Muslims still occupy the lower echelon gaps in modern society (Babb et al, 2006: 80).

For example, research from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2007, 30/04/07) found that 70% of Bangladeshi children were growing up in poverty in Britain. It is common for individuals living in materially and socially poor conditions to look for a collective identity that enables them to negotiate and improve their social position and status (Kepel, 1997). A recent research project currently taking place in two deprived areas of Manchester and Glasgow involving a qualitative study of 82 people aged 15-25 adds weight to Kepel's argument. Preliminary findings from the 'Youth and Religion' Project (2010) suggests a strong relationship between social deprivation, religious identities and spiritualities of young people. Munoz (1999) argues that Islam provides a vehicle for protest against people's social conditions, offering alternative methods of social and political actions. Poston (1991) and others (Begum and Eade, 2005: 187; Bari, 2002: 177; Werbner, 2004) concur and argue that Islam is appealing to young Muslims as it offers structure, hope, order, stability and confidence to individuals at a time when many feel powerless as their life chances are mainly determined by external structures over which they have no control. The Youth and Religion Project (2010) also found that religion and spirituality provides 'voice' to young people who are socially alienated, empowering them to become more active citizens.

Muslim identity is, therefore, expressed more visibly now than before because of the existing socio-political climate where they feel victimised and excluded from mainstream society and the political process (Akhtar, 2005: 171). The expression of a more voiceful and visible Muslim identity is therefore an expression of frustration and anger.

Secondly, Akhtar argues that in other parts of the world (Middle East, Africa, Far East), it has been suggested that the visibility of political Islam is a response to oppressive regimes (Kepel, 1997). Esposito (1997: 3) argues that many participants of Islamic revolts in the East since the 1970s believe that Islam offers a genuine alternative to the existing corrupt regimes. For example, the Iranian ‘Islamic’ Revolution in 1979 was a reaction to years of oppression under the American backed Shah. In both instances, Akhtar (2005: 165) argues that the return to Islam is a “*response to certain structural constrictions*”. Akhtar (2005: 165) contests that the return to Islam for many young Muslims around the world is complicated and is not simply a ‘return to religion’. The visibility of Islam, whether political, spiritual, radical or symbolic:

“offers individuals who feel in some way constrained by their circumstances an alternative ideology, a sense of belonging, solidarity, and a means of political mobilisation”

Furthermore, Akhtar argues that what attracts many marginalised Muslims in Britain to Islam is the ‘idea’ of resisting the dominant, negative hegemony. The return to religion according to Akhtar (2005: 168) is also psychological:

“There is a genuine sense of persecution: that the enemies of Islam will victimise Muslims whatever they do, and that it is therefore important to rally around Islam. In this sense, the return to religion is more psychological, built upon resistance to a perceived scapegoating of Muslims. The demonisation of the Muslim image, presenting it as backward and anti-modern, symbolically sets Muslims apart from all that is progressive and ‘Western’. This results in the symbolic exclusion of minority Muslims in the West. The turn to religion, in this sense, could be seen as active resistance to symbolic exclusion”.

Saeed and Zeyba concur with Akhtar’s psychological analysis above:

“This is a testing time for Muslims. Everybody is against us. But we will pass this test and inshallah everybody will realise one day that Islam is the only truth... Islam is very important for me” (Saeed)

“I don’t just have three sisters. Even though they are strangers, I feel connected to the many millions of Muslims around the world. Sometimes I feel as if I have millions of brothers and sisters.. like one big family” (Zeyba)

Although situated in class relations, the theory of relative deprivation adds weight to the arguments forwarded by Akhtar (2005), Kepel (1997), Munoz (1999) and Poston (1991). The concept of relative deprivation derives from the theoretical writings of Runciman (1966), who argued that political revolutions only occurred when the oppressed and poor became aware of the differences between them and the wealthy classes. Without this knowledge, they generally accepted their powerlessness. Therefore, it is not poverty but awareness of their relative poverty which leads to change and revolutions.

I argue that the theory of relative deprivation can also be used to explore the growth of Islamic communities around the globe. Where people feel unfairly excluded and relatively deprived, it is argued that they may turn to religion both to explain their position and also to gain solace and prestige. In this sense, religion offers its members psychological confidence against social alienation and deprivation. The growth of the Pentecostal churches in Britain, for example, attended largely by people of African and Caribbean origins, is one example of a response from a religious community to relative deprivation. As discussed in chapter two, the reality for many third generation Bangladeshis from Tower Hamlets is one of poverty and underachievement in education. Many are also reminded of their relative deprivation as they are situated in the middle of some of the wealthiest areas of Europe - the City of London and the Docklands Canary Wharf business development. Therefore, it is plausible to argue that the heightened interest in Islam by many third generation Bangladeshis from Tower Hamlets is a response to their social marginality and (relatively) deprived position in British society.

8.4 What does Islam offer the third generation Bangladeshis from Tower Hamlets

Whilst it is acknowledged that religion or religious nationalism can be a cause for conflict in many societies (ie; Kashmir, Northern Ireland, Palestine), the role of Islam, I argue, for many third generation Bangladeshis is important as they manage three interconnected issues. Firstly, the trauma and dislocation of migration (Hoffman, 1991). Secondly, years of systemic alienation, racism, underachievement, poverty and intergenerational cultural conflict. Thirdly, it helps them manage their own personal, ‘social’ (Jenkins, 1996) and ‘ambiguous’ (Wallerstein, 1991) identities of being a generation not fully belonging to a British nation or a Bangladeshi community. It is argued that many find themselves on the ‘margins’ of two cultures and two societies but a member of neither. Many have developed ‘marginal’ identities as they have two or more conflicting social identities (Stonequist, 1935; Park, 1928; Ahmed, T, 2005).

There are two major solutions that Islam provides this generation. Firstly, it empowers them and provides them with a neutral space where complex questions of race, social alienation and poverty become insignificant allowing them to engage in a journey from the ‘periphery’ to the ‘centre’ of British society (Malik, 2004; Saeed et al, 1999; Giddens, 1984; Mandair, 2005: 3) via a system of what Geaves (2005: 70) terms as ‘contest’ and ‘protest’. Saeed echoes this sense of empowerment he finds through Islam:

“I feel so proud to be a Muslim. It’s the most amazing feeling in the world”

Whilst there is validity in Gramscian Marxist claims that religion in general serves to legitimise power and hegemony exercised by the ruling elite of societies such as the church’s characteristic subservience to the state and ruling class interests and its hegemonic control

over its masses (Jones, 2006), a closer examination of the actions of some of the respondents of this study counters classical Marxist theory of religion being an “*opiate of the poor*” (Marx quoted in Bottomore & Rubel, 1963).

A key theological factor of the Muslim faith is the concept of the afterlife providing a sense of paradise from the difficulties of the present life (Maqsood, 2003: 43). Akbar confirms such thinking by suggesting that:

“this life is a test for Muslims in all areas – err, international politics, education, housing, employment, health... but we must have a strong sense of faith throughout these difficulties and we know that the end reward will be amazing”

Akbar’s belief in the “*amazing*” afterlife as opposed to demanding change in the present life adds weight to classical Marxist theory that religion legitimises unequal power relations in the current society and also helps maintain the dominant hegemony, and therefore diluting the demands for change. Equally, however, the call to Islam for some was a platform for social, personal, political and spiritual advancement and not a form of indoctrination which has dampened their revolutionary power:

“Once my baby is of nursery age I would like to start a Youth Work Diploma and fulfil my dream of becoming a youth worker. I want to make a difference to the local community and help tackle issues of drugs, crime and low motivation. Not only is this a personal ambition of mine, but our religion teaches us to better ourselves through inner peace, humanity and education” (Taiba)

“I don’t take shit from no one. I respect my parents and some of the older boys from my area. But Islam has given me the confidence to fight against injustice... if something is wrong then I must speak out... I know that no one will employ me because of my history. That is why I want to be my own boss. I want to earn loads of money and do charitable work in the future. This is both my religious and personal belief” (Saeed)

It is argued that for some such as Taiba and Saeed, religious faith acts as a source of empowerment (Sanghera & Thapur-Björkert, 2007: 187). Smith (1999) concurs with such a view. In his study of the East London religious community, Smith argued that whilst faith has

been a battle cry for international terrorists of different religious persuasions, it has equally been a catalyst for cross-cultural community and social cohesion and advancement and the search for social justice in the local domestic arena in Tower Hamlets. In this respect, I argue that the presence of Islam within the lives of many third generation Bangladeshis is more a social and political movement as opposed to being steeped in theology. Religion like ethnicity (Song, 2003) has, I argue, become a political symbol that does not merely exclude groups and individuals from mainstream society but also serves as a mode of identity, a symbol of belonging and political mobilisation.

Islam and ideas coming from Islam, viewed from a Weberian point of view (2001[1930]), can be a cause of social change as well as a form of social control and stability. Religion therefore is not wholly preoccupied with manipulating and exploiting people. Like Weber, Gramsci also accepted the possibility that religious beliefs and practices could develop and be popularised, particularly by working class intellectuals, in an attempt to challenge the dominant hegemony and support the growth of working class consciousness (Jones, 2006). The idea that religion may play a progressive role in the political struggles of oppressed people has also been forwarded by neo-Marxists such as Maduro (1982) who has suggested that in many Latin American societies and South Africa, the religious clergy has taken the role of Gramsci's working class intellectuals by voicing the discontent of the oppressed masses. The clergy have also been involved in shaping consciousness and also devising strategies of social and political action.

Secondly, Islam also provides many third generation Bangladeshis from East London (Tower Hamlets) membership to the 'imagined' (Anderson, 1983) Islamic global (umma) and "*potentially powerful*" (Ansari, 2004: 19) community where race, nationality, citizenship and

the colour of passport is insignificant when compared to the notion of global brother and sisterhood. As stated earlier, Zeyba believes in this ‘imagined community’, what she refers to as her “*one big family*”. This imagined community, however, remains an ideal. In practice, as we have seen (in chapter two) through the diversity of British Muslims in Britain, ethnic, class and national affiliations remain a barrier against the utopian ideal of ‘umma’ (Lewis, 2007: 22-23). However, it is not the reality but rather the metaphor of the umma that is attractive to its members (Malik, 2004: 1). The ideology of umma is immensely powerful and provides not only membership to a movement which is the second largest in the world and also the fastest growing, but also membership to over 1400 years of history and a mystical and romantic past (Saeed, Blain & Forbes, 1999). As the writer Hai (2008) reminds us, British Muslims may be outcasts in British society, but they were “*secure*” and “*confident as part of a greater – Muslim – whole*”. The political ideal of the Muslim ummah is therefore a search for identity, meaning, dignity and power (Modood, 2006: 46).

Whilst it is useful to examine the positive impact of Islam (Akthar, 2005; Smith, 1999; Eade and Begum, 2005; Bari, 2002) in the lives of the participants of this study, we must also take note of the criticisms aimed towards the role of religion in contemporary society. Firstly, all religions, not just Islam can also be a source for conflict and social division as is the case in Northern Ireland and Palestine. Secondly, religion can act as a form of social control in many societies and thus serve the interests of those in power. From a feminist viewpoint, Millet (1970) argues that religious rituals and myths are used as a way of legitimizing patriarchy. Religion, therefore, helps maintain the status quo in society, it legitimises economic and gender exploitation and justifies poverty and inequality. Taken from this viewpoint, religion can be oppressive and constraining for its members. Furthermore, adherence to a religious belief in a mono-religious society should not cause much conflict. However, in modern

complex multi-religious countries such as Britain, it can magnify social oppositions and polarise communities alongside moral and ethical grounds and heighten ‘otherness’. For example, both Saeed and Zeyba engage in stereotypical moral judgements against non-Muslims:

“They have no shame... all they do is drink alcohol, wear tarty clothes and go clubbing. They have no barriers” (Zeyba)

“Non Muslims will not go to heaven. You have to be a Muslim to go to heaven” (Saeed)

We have also heard echoes of such religiously based moral judgements in the voices of some of the other participants such as Sanjida and Taiba. The comments of Zeyba and Saeed illustrate how religion, whilst providing a positive space for self esteem, confidence and identity to develop, can also be a movement which divides people alongside moral and ideological grounds especially in complex and larger multicultural societies.

8.5 A new Islam for a new generation: the development of a Br-Islamic cultural identity

“The challenge [for the younger generation of Muslims] is to find ways to integrate the religious traditions of Islam into contemporary British life and to create a new British Islamic identity. It is a process which involves some difficulty”
(Storry & Childs, 2002: 251-252)

This section of the chapter argues that the third generation Bangladeshis from East London have met the challenge set by Storry and Childs (2002) above and have fused elements of Islam into contemporary British life which has led to the emergence of a vibrant ‘Br-Islamic’ culture.

Although there is much overlap, it is my argument that the vast majority of Muslims in Britain fit into Sahin's (2005) 'diffuse' and 'exploratory' category, discussed earlier in chapter two. The 'diffuse' group of Muslims consider themselves as Muslims predominantly because they were born into the religion. As such, their Muslim identity is as much cultural as it is religious. The vast majority of Muslim males across Britain, for example, confine their religious devotions to the weekly Friday prayer and occasional daily prayer as and when they can (Lewis, 2007: 3). Although they are frustrated and angry, they are not radical Islamists offering change and violent revolutions. They are just meshed into the everyday fabric of life worrying about routine issues affecting everybody such as mortgage payments and childcare provision.

Shareefa Fulat (2005: 69) from the Muslim Youth Helpline argues that "*the problems faced by Muslim youth are similar to their non-Muslim peers: drugs, mental health, relationships, careers, jobs training and sexuality*" and because these issues are taboo in many Muslim communities, they are often ignored altogether. Therefore far from "*offering support, the family and the community are the source of the problem*". I argue that although his voice is steeped in religious rhetoric and he is angered by the plight of Muslims across the globe, the life story of Saeed mirrors the characteristics of the 'diffuse' group of Muslims as he does not practice the faith in terms of prayer and dress but is committed ideologically.

The 'exploratory' group (Sahin, 2005) are an educated and professional group of Muslims who are mainly concerned with the revival of an internationally orientated modern version of Islam (Glynn, 2002). The culture and characteristics of this "*post-Islamist*" (Lewis, 2007: xiv) generation is summarised by the Guardian journalist Bunting in her workshop involving 103 British Muslims (2004: 17):

“The 103 British Muslims who joined us last week could be described as amongst the success stories of two decades on integration: from mostly humble backgrounds, they have got to university, or are working in jobs as diverse as accounts, pharmacists, social workers, journalists, civil servants, lawyers, nurses and entrepreneurs. Alongside their academic and career achievements, they have drawn from their faith a powerful social conscience; the majority of our participants devote a considerable amount of their time to volunteering in community organisations and political campaigns. This is a pivotal generation; they have the skills and education which many of their parents lacked to make their experiences heard. And that experience will increasingly be one which will have international resonance: the two civilisations of Islam and the West are not abstract concepts to them, but the influences they daily negotiate in their own lives. How they vote, how they dress, how they pray, whom they befriend and whom they marry; all are influenced by the accommodation they find between the two, at a time when internationally, the two are being set in violent opposition”

The emergence of the City Circle⁴⁶ in 1999 is a good example of this self-critical “*pivotal generation*” described by Bunting above. The City Circle was established by a group of graduate friends who wanted to create a space in London where professionals could meet and socialise and discuss issues affecting young British Muslims. Lewis (2007: 61) refers to this as the ‘halal’ alternative to the Friday night pub culture. It could be argued that with its emphasis on professional advancement, education, engagement with civil society, human rights, women’s rights including leadership roles, “*critical*” citizenry (Ramadan, 2004) and democracy, this group of Muslims are contributing to the modernist and reformist agenda in Islam that Kamrava (2006) and his colleagues have eluded to. I argue that with their high emphasis on education and career aspirations, Zeyba, Taiba, Sanjida, Akbar and Azad will become part of this educated and professional class. However, it must be stated that at this moment, this group still represents an elitist minority as the reality of material and social deprivation is still affecting the majority of Muslims across Britain.

⁴⁶ www.thecitycircle.com

Both of these groups (diffuse and exploratory) are active agents of this new Br-Islamic culture and are part of a British born modern, literate, “trendy” (Hoque, 2004c), Islamically conscious and technological (what I have termed the “MTV, Ipod and Facebook”) generation. Br-Islam is therefore a medium between tradition and modernity. Also, the Br-Islamic culture has been provided with theoretical and theological credence from a new body of leaders such as Hamza Yusuf, Osama Canon and Tariq Ramadan whose messages of equality, discernment, human rights, democracy and the exertion of civil responsibility is assisting many young British Muslims to come to terms with their national (British), ethnic (Bangladeshi) and religious (Islam) identities.

Furthermore, through internal debate, self criticism (Lewis, 2007: 112-114, 135-137) and “linguistic competence” (Hoffman, 1991), many are translating “anger into argument” (Hoffman, 1991) and also shaping the future of British Islam alongside a model compatible with a Western British culture, albeit within a ‘halal’ context (Le Quesne, 2001). A brief survey of this new Br-Islamic culture suggests “complimentarity” (Malik, 2004: 1) of Islam with Western concepts, as opposed to stark opposition. For example, there is the emergence of ‘halal’ banking compliant with shariah rules on finance⁴⁷, ‘halal’ insurance⁴⁸, Muslim media⁴⁹ (Ahmed, 2005), gender segregated eating out culture⁵⁰, holiday companies with halal values⁵¹ (Suleaman, 2010; Khalil, 2010) and the emergence of a particularistic Islamic alternative social entertainment scene⁵². Whilst the emergence of such a culture could be viewed as separatist and isolationist and thus lead to a strengthening of a ‘us’ versus ‘them’ mentality as well as limit the number of cross cultural/ cross religious contacts between

⁴⁷ For example, Islamic Bank of Britain www.islamic-bank.com

⁴⁸ For example, Salaam Insurance www.salaaminsurance.com

⁴⁹ For example, Q News, Emel Magazine, Asian Woman, Al-Jazeera, Islam Channel

⁵⁰ For example, *Maedah Grill* and *Barakah* restaurants centred around the East London Mosque

⁵¹ Also know as ‘halal’ holidays, refer to <http://islamictravels.com>

⁵² Muslim music artists such as Native Deen, Sami Yusuf and Mecca 2 Medina, Muslim comedians such as Azhar Usman, Muslim speed dating and annual Islamic conferences such as ‘Islam Expo’

people, I argue that these developments provide practical and theoretical infrastructure for this Br-Islamic culture to develop and prosper. Br-Islam, therefore, is more than just a social or religious movement, it denotes a whole new ‘modern’ British way of life (Kibria, 2006; al Yafai, 2010)⁵³.

8.6 Where is the evidence for the existence of this ‘Br-Islamic’ culture

A major element of this new modern Br-Islamic culture is a contemporary fashion arena for a young and trendy generation. I will focus on the emergence of the ‘Hijabi Barbie’ (Fanshawe, 2006) in order to illustrate the argument above.

Whilst the emergence of a particularly gendered space in Br-Islam and the role of the hijab is discussed in greater depth in chapter ten, I argue that the development of a distinctive Islamic fashion industry underpins the social and political ethos of this new Br-Islamic culture and provides a positive sense of community and sisterhood. The hijab has become a mainstream, cool, fashionable “*accessory*” (Iqbal, 2010) for many women although there have been recent incidents where politicians have attempted to bring the question and symbolism of the dress for Muslim women into national debate (Taylor & Dodd, 2006). I have suggested in earlier research that the hijab is “*trendy*” (Hoque, 2004c). There is strong evidence to back up such an assertion. For example, there are catwalk models who are wearing the hijab (Ahmed, 2004), there are websites and blogs specifically dedicated to the hijab⁵⁴, and there are many retail outlets catering for this new Muslim female colourful and trendy image offering female shop assistants in a female only environment⁵⁵ (Scott, 2004).

⁵³ Refer to appendix 7 for visual illustrations of Br-Islam

⁵⁴ For example, www.thehijabshop.com, <http://islamfashionandidentity.blogspot.com/>

⁵⁵ For example, *Innayah* in Shadwell and *Arabian Nights* in Whitechapel – both in Tower Hamlets

In most instances, there is a fusion of Western dress, technology and concepts with Muslim attire and etiquette. For example, young women wearing headscarves with jeans, expensive trainers and listening to the Ipod whilst eating out in restaurants that have segregated gendered seating and do not serve alcohol. This is the embodiment of the “*Hijabi Barbie*” (Fanshawe: 2006). Dressed in a brightly coloured hijab, flowing skirt and jewelled shoes, the Hijabi Barbies, argues Fanshawe (2006) do not claim to be “*perfect Muslims*” and are just like the rest of the population. They are fed up of being tarnished with the brush of fanaticism, extremism and oppression and are increasingly choosing to express their identities and faith through dress. These “*visibly Muslim*” (Tarlo, 2009) women are engaged in internal self criticism and have fused elements of religion together with fashion (refer to appendix 7). They are modern, trendy, religiously conscious and engaged in “*negotiating*” their femininities within patriarchal practices (Sanghera & Thapur-Björkert, 2007: 187). The example of the ‘Hijabi Barbie’, I argue, is a constant negotiation between the different layers of identities of what it means to be British, Bangladeshi and Muslim in the year 2010. As

Zeyba states:

“I don’t like the disgusting clothes my mum wears. I like wearing baggy jeans and baggy tops. I mainly shop in H & M. I have many coloured hijabs to match the colour of my clothes”

Sanjida also adds:

“Sometimes I look forward to weddings. It’s an excuse to dress up.... I don’t mind wearing the headscarf. Actually, I have some really bright funky ones that match my sarees”

A whole new infrastructure is emerging catering for the needs of the Br-Islamic generation.

As Ahmed (2005:122) notes:

“an entire social, cultural and educational infrastructure appears to be developing amongst young Muslims that provides ‘Islamic’ alternatives in areas of entertainment and social life, but more importantly news and knowledge acquisition”

In addition to providing the third generation with outlets to voice opinions and frustrations in a democratic way and become part of civil society, the emergence of services like the MYH⁵⁶ and a particularistic Islamic fashion scene also provides spaces for their multiple identities to develop.

8.7 The complex relationship between the ‘Br-Islamic’ Identity and Western Capitalist culture

I argue that the revivalist Islam practised by many third generation Bangladeshis sits comfortably within a Western lifestyle model and is not hostile to modernity as argued by many commentators (Turner, 2004). With its emphasis on banking, education, smaller families, individualism, women’s rights, engagement with media and civil society, professionalism, ‘eating out’ culture among many others, it can be argued that the Br-Islamic culture is ‘halal’ capitalism. Islam is modernising and Westernising British Muslims, allowing them to be both part of a British/ Western and religious/ reformist/ spiritual community at the same time. Therefore, the Br-Islamic culture is more an evolution of Islam in the West rather than a rejection of it. The relationship between capitalism and Islam, however, is complex.

Whilst Islamic *Shariah* resists the profit making underbelly of capitalism, there are commentators such as Kepel (2003: 370) who have argued that the capitalist project has triumphed over the radical Islamist project especially in the Middle East. Hutton (2007) agrees with Kepel by suggesting that Islamic theology cannot compete with the “*march of globalisation, Western values and their self-evident superiority in delivering prosperity that Islam cannot match*”. Contributing to this debate, left wing writers such as Tariq Ali (2003:

⁵⁶ www.muslimyouth.net

3-4) have argued that the unequal distribution of wealth and power created by a global capital market has caused a huge section of the global population to feel helpless, frustrated and angry. It is, therefore, the very conditions of global capitalism, what he refers to as “*imperial fundamentalism*” that has created conditions for angry Muslims, some of whom have engaged in armed struggle. *Guardian* journalist Ash (2005) summarises this debate:

“[The problem is when the West and Islam meet mainly through immigration into European societies] ... it arises, in particular, from the direct, personal encounter of young, first or second generation Muslim immigrants with Western, and especially European, secular modernity. The most seductive system known to humankind, with its polychromatic consumer images of health, wealth, excitement, sex and power, is hugely attractive to young people from often poor, conservative Muslim backgrounds”

Whilst the discourse above predominantly relates to the rise of extremist and radical Islam around the globe in the wake of capital and imperial penetration, I argue that the Br-Islamic generation have not so much become angered by the triumph of capitalism, rather as Ash (2005) notes, they have become attracted to the “*seductive*” powers of consumer materialism. However, they have created their own version of ‘halal’ capitalism which is both a statement of the triumph of modernity and a marker of a positive Br-Islamic identity.

A major criticism of this progressive and new Br-Islamic culture with its emphasis on modernity and reform, is that it mainly recruits its members from colleges, university and professional circles. Faced with the realisation that the majority of the Muslim community are living in social and material deprivation, it could be argued that this liberal and progressive version of Islam remains an option only for the elites (Murad, 2003: 5-6). Furthermore, it is questionable whether materially poor Bangladeshis actually have access to computers and internet to access the MYH website, can afford travel and entry fees to annual conferences or

afford going out to restaurants. However, I argue that the stories, aspirations and politicisation of the six participants of this study echo the rising popularity of the Br-Islamic culture among the materially poor third generation Bangladeshis from Tower Hamlets.

Br-Islam is still in its early stages but is rapidly developing. Akbar, Azad, Zeyba and Sanjida have high academic and professional aspirations and will contribute to the modernist agenda and Saeed and Taiba have allowed personal spaces in their lives for Islam. All six are ideologically connected to the notion of Islam as a progressive and modern movement. The emergence of numerous halal restaurants, Islamic banks and Muslim fashion outlets in Tower Hamlets suggests that there is a target population for its services. I argue that the six participants of this study are a vital component of this Br-Islamic target population. For example, Taiba regularly goes to shisha bars with her girlfriends and Akbar enjoys eating out in halal restaurants. We are witnessing the emergence of a new and vibrant Br-Islamic culture in Tower Hamlets which is a symbolic victory for multicultural Britain and should be viewed positively. And it is this question of whether Br-Islam can prosper and sit alongside and *within* multicultural Britain that we turn to next.

Chapter 9

The assertion of a Br-Islamic identity in public spaces – a critical discussion of ‘Britishness’ and British multiculturalism

9.0 Introduction

The concept of Britishness is complex, problematic and ambiguous (Cohen, 1994). I argue that it is the very essence of multiculturalism and British(ness) which promotes and encourages an alternative Muslim identity to prosper and sit comfortably within a multicultural (public) space. The Br-Islam discussed in depth in the previous chapter is a positive manifestation of British multiculturalism and whilst there are a tiny minority who propagate segregation, Br-Islam is essentially modern in its outlook and is integrationist in ideology. Furthermore, considering that all six participants viewed themselves as “*British*” by virtue of their birthright, it is argued that a national civic British identity is another important layer of identity for many third generation Bangladeshis.

In order to develop the above arguments further, this chapter is divided into six sections:

- The first and second sections of this chapter locate the voices of the six respondents of this study within British multiculturalism;
- The third section of this chapter discusses various theories of multiculturalism;
- The fourth part is a critical analysis of John Rex’s (2006) public/ private precondition of a multicultural society;
- The fifth section of this chapter examines British Muslim assertiveness in public spaces which challenges the secular tradition of modern European history;

- In the conclusion, I argue that Br-Islam must be recognised and accepted in secular public spaces. Muslims must not be viewed as the ‘other’/ ‘them’ but rather part of the plural British ‘us’.

9.1 Who am I ? : I am British, not Bengali

Like many of the 11-16 year olds from Stepney Green School discussed earlier in chapter one of this study⁵⁷, the concept of Britishness was an important and complex notion for all six respondents. Unlike, many first and second generation Bangladeshis who have an emotional and ideological bond with the ‘homeland’ (Bangladesh) (Hoque, 2005; Gardner, 1993 & 2002), all six respondents viewed Britain and in particular the local community of Tower Hamlets as their ‘home’.⁵⁸ Tower Hamlets provided many with a sense of community, comfort and familiarity:

“Although I see my future outside of Tower Hamlets, I do feel a sense of community and comfort living in an area where most people think, behave and look the same” (Azad)

“Newham does not have the same sort of community feeling that Tower Hamlets does. There is a sense of safety and comfort when you are with your own” (Akbar)

Despite the experiences of racism in their childhood years and feelings of displacement, the place of birth was a determining factor in how they identified themselves:

“How can I be anything else apart from being British ? I was born here, I am one hundred percent British” (Saeed)

⁵⁷ When asked about their national identity, 63% of the respondents used the term ‘British’ either as part of a hyphenated identity or as a singular identity. Similarly, two out of the three participants of the pilot study also used a hyphenated ‘British’ identity to describe themselves (refer to section 4.4 of chapter four)

⁵⁸ Many studies have highlighted that the notion of Britain as ‘home’ was also important for the second generation Bangladeshis from East London. Refer to Gardner & Shukur (1994: 142-64)

“This is my home – East London. It’s where I grew up. It’s a place where I find comfortable”
(Taiba)

“I have a British passport therefore I am British” (Zeyba)

The above views are in keeping with numerous research findings which suggest that people of ethnic minority origin feel British even if they were born elsewhere (Manning & Roy, 2010). For example, the National Statistics Department found in 2004 that three quarters of Bangladeshi people claimed a British national identity (Frith, 2004).

Although for some, Bangladesh as their ‘ancestral home’ (Garbin, 2005) still occupies a sense of *“deep connection”* (Akbar), the idea of being British is even more appealing to many third generation Bangladeshis when faced with an alternative. Visits to Bangladesh for many have reinforced Britain as ‘home’ (Basit, 1997):

“I didn’t enjoy my visit to Bangladesh. I was sick and did not enjoy the hot weather. I missed my mates in London. My family always talk of Bangladesh as ‘home’. My visit to Bangladesh made me realise that home for me was East London” (Saeed)

“I don’t think that I would be able to adapt to the Bangladeshi way of life. Life is very different over there. The food, weather, drainage, culture, clothes, transport, electricity, and too much poverty. I know how lucky I am. I am happy that they [grandparents] came here...”
(Sanjida)

The importance of birthplace and childhood memories in determining ‘home’ and national identity is also highlighted by Sanjida and Zeyba:

“I have hazy memories of visits to Bangladesh. There is no comparison. I loved my childhood in East London. My friends, my area, going to the park... sometimes I think that my dada

(grandfather) preferred Bangladesh than here and I think why but then I think that if I had grown up in Bangladesh then I probably would think the same way”

(Sanjida)

“I hate going to Bangladesh. London is my home” (Zeyba)

However, this British national identity has many facets and is multiple and complex for some of the participants:

“Sometimes I am a proper Muslim. Like during Ramadan when I am fasting. Sometimes I am Bengali like when I go round my aunties with my family and we have to dress up and eat lots of food. Err, and sometimes I am British when I am out with my mates going out for a meal or to the pictures” (Zeyba)

“I am British because I was born here. But I am also so many other things – Bangladeshi, Muslim and a girl [pause] It’s all rather confusing” (Sanjida)

Many commentators such as Geaves (2005: 75) have suggested that the exertion of more than one identity for the younger generation of Muslims is an example of their “flexible” and “situational” identities which they are able to exert at ease and remain secure in their primary identities of being Muslim and British. Others such as Begum and Eade (2005: 179) have argued that their “mobile identities” allows them to negotiate their multiple identities on a daily basis.

Ward (2004: 170) argues that there are “tensions in all multiple identities, but that does not make multiple identities fundamentally incompatible”. The primacy of particular identities may change so that a third generation Bangladeshi from Tower Hamlets may feel more ‘Islamic’ than Bangladeshi or vice versa in any given situation and context. Ahmed (2005: 200) has referred to this process as “shifting and situational” identities. This is the case for Zeyba above as she feels like a “Muslim” during Ramadan, “Bengali” when she is at her

Auntie's home and "*British*" when she is socialising with her friends. For some, the different identities denote different communities of belonging.

However, the equation of 'home' and a national British identity with a place of birth, childhood memories and a sense of community is not as clear cut as some of the above voices state. There are many socio-political complexities involved. In a post 9/11 and 7/7 world where Islam and Islamic values have been presented in many right wing⁵⁹ and mainstream political circles as a threat to peace and order and depicted as anti-Western and against the British 'way of life', there is great tension and debate whether you can be both 'Muslim' and 'British' (Bunting, 2004). The racial, ethnic and religious identities of third generation Bangladeshis from Tower Hamlets has become situated outside of what it means to be 'British' even though all six respondents viewed themselves as 'British'. As such the notion of Britishness is being actively contested by the respondents of this study to become inclusive in contemporary society.

9.2 The complexity of Britishness

What is Britishness ? Is it centred around iconic symbols such as HP Sauce, the Union Jack, the royal family (CRE, 2005: 20-21), Marmite, "*roast beef and roast potatoes*" (Bagguley & Hussain, 2005: 215), red buses and fish and chips? Or is it more about everyday 'British' traits such as talking about the weather, football hooliganism and queuing in an orderly fashion? Or is it more to do with values and traditions of liberty, democracy, respect for the rule of law, tolerance, pragmatism, decency and fairness (CRE, 2005; Eyre, 2004)?

⁵⁹ www.englishdefenceleague.org

Britishness, I argue, is all of the above and much more. It is also important to note that not everybody can claim Britishness for themselves and not everyone wants to be associated with it. Power relations (some of which are related to ethnicity, religion, class, age, generation and gender) are fundamentally involved in the definition and maintenance of the notion of Britishness (CRE, 2005).

As a theoretical concept, Britishness is a constantly evolving and complex debate. British historian Paul Ward has examined the definition and redefinition of national identities within the United Kingdom since the 1870s. Being British, argues Ward (2004: 1-2) is a complex issue as it is no longer viewed as innate, static or permanent. Nations and national identities are not permanent and unchanging, they are the products of constant renegotiation, contest and debate. The idea of Britishness has been threatened, challenged and in many respects has been in “*crisis*” since the end of the Second World War by historical moments such as the end of Empire, commonwealth immigration, ‘Americanisation’, devolution, the weakening of the monarchy, European integration and the re-emergence of Celtic nationalisms (Ward, 2004: 171).

Mass non-white immigration into British shores since de-colonisation has challenged the racialised version of Britishness that has rested on a myth of ethnic homogeneity and has adhered in part to the slogan “*there ain’ no black in the Union Jack*” (Gilroy, 1987). This racialised Britishness has been presented as closed and exclusive by historic controversial political figureheads such as Enoch Powell (Heffer, 1998). Furthermore, to classify the national identities of nearly sixty million people in one theory or definition does not mirror the complexity and diversity of people’s identities.

Whilst there are many controversial historical debates of Britishness being associated with empire, imperialism, capitalism and Protestantism and as being a hegemonic 'idea' being imposed upon lower classes and colonies (including Wales, Scotland and Ireland) (Ward, 2004; Colley, 1994; Robbins, 1989; Weight, 2002), I have chosen to debate and discuss a more contemporary definition as it relates directly to the life experiences of the six participants of this study. The idea of Britishness as a concept which positively embraces cultural diversity (Alibhai-Brown, 2000; Parekh, 2000a) further illustrates the complex and fluid process of national identity and the notion of 'home' discussed in this chapter.

This approach suggests that the concept of liberal egalitarian multiculturalism lies at the core of contemporary Britishness. It is an open and inclusive version of Britishness that welcomes diversity as a core component of the British national character. It is essentially a very optimistic view which argues that Britishness has become a diverse collective identity. As Ward (2004: 5) notes, throughout history, Britishness has more often than not been compatible with a huge variety of other identities. As such, Britishness, argues Ward (2004: 5) has been a "*flexible identity*". This flexibility, I argue, should be able to incorporate the ethno-religious identities of the third generation Bangladeshis from Tower Hamlets which is very publicly and confidently expressed. This concept of Britishness champions a civic, rather than ethnic, Britishness that recognises and includes diversity rather than seeking to subordinate difference (Alibhai-Brown, 2000).

Furthermore, this concept of Britishness demands the decoupling of Britishness from racial connotations of whiteness so that black and Asian people in Britain do not feel excluded. It is, as Ward (2004: 138) argues, a "*different kind of British*" and promotes a form of black Britishness (Parekh, 2000b). Britain and Britishness is thus a "*community of communities*"

(Parekh, 2000a) and as the poet Benjamin Zephaniah suggests, the core ingredients of respect, tolerance, understanding and unity are necessary for this ‘New Britain’ to be realised.⁶⁰ Kastoryano (2002: 3-6) notes that many modern European nation states play an important role in adjusting policies and redefining the terms of citizenship so that minority communities are able to “*negotiate*” their identities within a nationalist discourse. I argue that steeped within the politics of liberal egalitarian multiculturalism described above, such a process of “*negotiation*” of identities takes shape through Br-Islam for many third generation Bangladeshis as it enables them to be “*loyal*” to both their nation and also their own communities.

The new Br-Islamic identity which echoes Ward’s ‘different kind of British’ (2004: 138) argument is in conjunction with the rhetoric of the desire to establish a ‘new Britain’ by the ‘new Labour’ government by positioning black and Asian people more centrally within the British national identity. This ‘new Britain’ was encapsulated by the late Robin Cook MP in 2001. In what became known as the ‘Chicken Tikka Massala Speech’, Cook outlined an inclusive version of Britishness which celebrated ethnic and cultural pluralism. He argued that:

“Chicken Tikka Massala is now a true British national dish, not only because it is the most popular, but because it is a perfect illustration of the way Britain absorbs and adapts external influences. Chicken Tikka is an Indian dish. The Massala sauce was added to satisfy the desire of British people to have their meat served with gravy” (Cook, 2001)

There are, however, limitations and resistance associated with this idealised plural and inclusive concept of Britishness which is given theoretical and political backing by the

⁶⁰ <http://www.benjaminzephaniah.com/content/245.php>

politics of liberal egalitarian multiculturalism. For example, the idea of plural Britishness has been challenged by the resistance shown towards many British Muslim women who wear the hijab in public spaces (Mirza, et al, 2007: 5), in a post 9/11 world.⁶¹ Also, Kenan Malik (2001) criticises such a strand of multiculturalism by insisting that it helps segregate communities far more effectively than racism. Dhondy (2001) suggests that the focus should not be on ‘multi-cultures’, but rather on universal values such as freedom, respect and democracy. Trevor Philips (quoted in Baldwin, 2004) also declared that liberal multiculturalism was useful once. However, it has run its course as it encourages difference as opposed to encouraging minorities to be truly British. Philips famously quoted that Britain is “*sleepwalking into segregation*” on a scale already witnessed in the USA (Casciani, 2005).

Britishness as a plural and inclusive concept is steeped in traditional and contemporary theories of multiculturalism and it is to this debate which we turn to next.

9.3 Towards a ‘critical’ multiculturalism

“[Since the wave of mass immigration in the 1950s and 60s from former colonies,] *European nations have been looking for different ways to blend different people of different cultures into successful peaceful societies. All had the same goal: a society that gives equal opportunity and equal respect, regardless of race, creed, color or faith. Forty years on, that society still doesn’t exist. But multiculturalism is with us to stay. So the question is how to make it work for Europe*” (Farouky, 2007:18)

Multiculturalism in Britain, as a system of social and political governance, has emerged out of a history of race relations and immigration. It is therefore important to have a brief

⁶¹ The 9/11 world is a world where Muslims in Britain and elsewhere have been presented as anti-Western. Refer to Sardar, Z (2002: 51-55)

discussion of such a history before we discuss the many variations of multicultural theory present in contemporary academic debate.

The discourse, laws and policies governing racism in Britain which emerged after mass immigration in the 1950s was heavily influenced by the civil rights movement in the United States and assumed that discrimination was focused around colour and ethnicity. Colour racism was the dominant post-immigration perspective (Rex & Moore, 1967; CCCS, 1982; Gilroy, 1987; Solomos, 1992). After the initial welcoming of Ethnic Minorities into the British shore as labourers needed for the British economy post World War II, competition for jobs, scarce resources and poverty led to a backlash against people of colour. Shain (2003: 1-2) argues that at various points since the mass immigration from the commonwealth of people of colour, black people have been positioned and represented (negatively) as criminals, drug dealers, welfare cheats, single mothers and prostitutes (Layton-Henry, 1992; McLaren, 1994: 45-74).

Furthermore, the new 'war on terror' has witnessed the emergence of Asian men as hot-headed irrational terrorists. These constructions of the immigrant 'other' (*extracomunitari*) (Triandafyllidou, 2001), argues Shain (2003), has launched a threat to the 'British' Way of Life (Barker, 1981) (one of gentlemanly conduct, of honesty, of community). The negative representation of the immigrant 'other' has also revived notions of 'in' and 'out' group rhetoric steeped within nationalist discourse (Modood, 2006: 12; Hagendoorn, 1993).

Modood (2006: 38) argues that with the physical assertiveness and mass public presence of Muslims in Britain, a more plural perspective is now needed which recognises that discrimination can also be based on religious beliefs, rituals and practices. This echoes the

earlier thinking of Barker (1981) and others (Lawrence, 1982) who argue that the ‘new’ shape of racism discriminates on the basis of values and culture and not wholly on the colour of skin although there is a complex relationship between biological and cultural racism (Goldberg, 1990). Modood (2006: 41) agrees with Barker and suggests that racism in the contemporary period has moved away from the ‘political blackness’⁶² period of the 1970s and 80s where the British population was largely divided into either ‘black’ or ‘white’. Political blackness, argues Modood (2006: 41) did not offer an appropriate forum for the frustrations of many South Asians. A more particular ethnic or religious identity, where culture and the ‘way of life’ has taken on more of a significance rather than a ‘politically’ black identity, is more appropriate to discuss in contemporary society.

However, whether ‘black’ or ‘white’ colour racism or discrimination based upon choice of language, dress, culture and way of life as in the present era, the assertiveness of a minority identity must be situated within the backdrop of anti-racism discourse and the exertion of these public identities (black or Muslim) is a search for power, meaning, belonging, identity and visibility in a system where many are invisible and marginalised. Whilst the resistance of Asian youth to victimisation has been well documented (Sivanandan, 1983; Castles & Miller, 1993), political blackness or the black identity movement of the 1970s and 80s is important as it was successful in raising questions of how British society had to change to accommodate new groups. It is this question of ‘accommodation’ that most European states post immigration have tried to tackle through its various multicultural policies. The rhetoric and objective of justice, recognition and equality seeking has remained the same even though the units of analysis for the Muslims of Britain has shifted from ‘political blackness’ to ‘Islamophobia’.

⁶² The term ‘black’ is used in its political sense and therefore includes both those of African Caribbean and South Asian origin. Refer to Shain, F (2003: xi)

It is within this socio-historical backdrop and context that many variations of multicultural theory have emerged.

The American social scientist David Theo Goldberg (1994:1) argues that the ‘multicultural condition’ cannot be reductively defined, rather it can be described phenomenologically. Multiculturalism as a social and political condition of British society is both problematic and complex. It has emerged out of a historical backdrop of hegemonic monocultural ‘white Britain’ and has undergone a conflictual history of resistance, accommodation, integration and transformation. The various forms of multiculturalisms discussed below and throughout this chapter are concerned with the notion of ‘power’. The multicultural condition argues Goldberg (1994: 30) is a “*contest over power, over who mobilises and expresses power, over how power is conceived and exercised, over who benefits or suffers the effects of power and its institutionalisation*”. There are many disparities between the principles and the practices of multicultural expression. I discuss below a few variations of multicultural theory.

With specific reference to American society in 1980s and 90s, sociologist Peter McLaren has developed a typology of multiculturalism which provides a useful background to the current state of British egalitarian and political multiculturalism. There are many forms of multiculturalism argues McLaren (2004: 47-51).

Firstly, there is ‘conservative’ multiculturalism which is deeply embedded in the colonial legacy of white supremacy. It rests on the notion that people of minority origin were savages and barbaric whilst white Europeans and North Americans were enlightened and civilised. The recent Bush/ Blair rhetoric during the Iraq War 2003 has reworked such terminology into

the modern global geo political fabric as some of the core rationale behind the war rested on notions of global security, exporting democracy and a civilising mission (Rogers, 2002). These representations and images were also gendered in that African women were seen as animalistic in terms of their sexuality and Arab women were seen as exotic and guarding their sexuality behind the veil (Banton, 1997; Fryer, 1988; Lawrence, 1982).

The discourse which speaks of race, ethnicity and religion as backwards, argues Shain (2003: 2), is a discourse of *cultural pathology*. This discourse implies that something is inherently inferior in the cultural and familial background of those people from minority ethnic groups. This discourse also problematises such groups and positions them in an unequal relationship of inferiority to the white majority group. There is a clear relationship between Shain's *cultural pathology* argument and the emergence of a conservative multicultural thinking whose rhetoric can also be located in evolutionary theories such as Social Darwinism, United States Manifest Destiny and Christian Imperialism throughout the developing world which locates white Europeans in a hegemonic intellectual and morally superior position steeped in religious theology.

Crucially, argues McLaren (1994: 48), its proponents pay "*lip service*" to the cognitive equality of all races in society and argue for a national common culture constructed with clear border lines and a delegitimisation of foreign languages and cultures. This form of multicultural theory has been heavily criticised by its 'liberal' opponents mainly for its refusal to treat whiteness as a form of ethnicity and in doing so positioning whiteness as an invisible norm by which other ethnicities and cultures should be judged. Conservative multiculturalism furthermore is essentially monolingual and adopts the position that English

should be the only official language. English as a language has also been elevated to a ‘truth telling’ status (McLaren, 1994: 50).⁶³

The liberal theory rejects this and argues for a more plural approach which recognises multilingualism and advocates bi-lingual education. With a more progressive concept of freedom, justice, diversity and equality, liberal multiculturalism takes the view that all races and cultures are of equal moral and intellectual status and it is mainly due to structural inequalities in income, health and education and the competitive nature of the capitalist economy which does not allow everybody to compete equally on a level playing field (McLaren, 1994: 51). Left-liberal approaches to multiculturalism, however, whilst still emphasising public equality of all people does also acknowledge important cultural differences between different communities and people which are responsible for different behaviours, attitudes, values and social practices (McLaren, 1994: 51-52).

Of central importance to this study is the development of what McLaren and others (Walzer, 1994; Lott, 1994) have termed as ‘critical’ multiculturalism. This theory strays away from the conservative and liberal stress on ‘sameness’ and the left-liberal preoccupation with ‘difference’ and argues that contemporary society needs to push for the politics of pluralism and also take note of the workings of ‘power’ and ‘privilege’ (McLaren, 1994: 54). Walzer (1994: 91) argues that critical multiculturalism is not simply a product of greater social and economic equality but it also represents a “*programme*” for greater equality. Lott (1994: 230-258) suggests that critical multiculturalism is a form of resisting monoculturalism and cultural hegemony as well as socioeconomic exploitation and hardship. I argue that many of the third generation Bangladeshis from East London, through the expression of Br-Islam in

⁶³ The powerful position of English as a global language is discussed further by Pennycook (1994)

public spaces, are engaging in such a critical multiculturalism described by McLaren, Lott and Walzer above in their attempt to realise the ideal of what Modood and Kastoryano (2006: 171) have termed egalitarian multiculturalism where their ethno-religious identities are afforded equal space and respect in wider society:

“Equality as not having to hide or apologise for one’s origins, family or community, but requiring others to show respect for them and adapt public attitudes and arrangements so that the heritage they represent is encouraged rather than ignored or expected to wither away”

Furthermore, this equality recognises and respects differences within the public (political) arena and affirms it as well (Modood, 2006: 42).

9.4 John Rex’s public/ private precondition of a secular multicultural society

A critical engagement with the thinking of John Rex is important in building on the various theories of multiculturalism discussed above. In his earlier work, Rex (1986) puts forward a version of multiculturalism which emphasises the importance of being culturally different - that whatever the racial or ethnic background of a person, human beings are in some sense entitled to equal treatment. He argued that:

“...something has to be done to ensure the survival of a plurality of cultures. A fundamental human right... is the right to be culturally different”

(Rex, 1986: 120)

Whilst still emphasising the importance on the recognition of difference and diversity as a necessary condition for a multicultural society, Rex’s concept has evolved in his contemporary writings with a bigger emphasis on the pivotal separation between the public

and private space in the realisation of a multicultural society. In order for a multicultural world to be realised, Rex (1998) argues that there are two distinct factors that need to be taken into account.

Firstly, the integration of immigrants should not be viewed as cultural assimilation but as cultural diversity coupled with equal opportunity in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance. Secondly, there should be two separate domains for immigrant communities – one being the public sphere and the other of private culturally diverse communities. In the public domain all individuals should be treated equally. Whilst in the domain of the separate communities, individuals may practise their diverse cultures, speak their own languages, practise its own religion and adhere to its own customs and family rituals. Rex (2005: 241) argues that as far as Muslims are concerned, this concept of a multicultural society recognises their right to practise their own religion in the private domain but does not recognise their right to have their religion made part of the public domain.

Whilst Rex's public/ private distinction sits comfortably within a secular polity, it becomes problematic in its application to a publically assertive Br-Islamic identity whose everyday beliefs, practices and lifestyle (food choice, prayers, dress code) are very much part of a public identity. The six participants of this study as well as countless others from the 1.6 million Muslims of Britain will find it difficult to make a public/ private distinction of their Islamic identity:

“the hijab is a vital part of my personal and public identity. I feel secure and safe in my hijab and I want others to know that I am Muslim” (Zeyba)

“I had to quit my previous part time job because they kept on giving me shifts on Friday afternoons despite me telling my boss that I needed to go to the mosque for prayers on Fridays” (Azad)

Islam is therefore a religion *in* and *of* the public space. It needs the public space in order to fulfil its goals and its public existence is the pre-requisite of many of the articulations required by the religion (Allievi, 2004: 187). This is an argument acknowledged by Rex (2005: 242) who argues that his notion of the private/ public will be rejected by many Muslims who view Islam as a ‘complete way of life’.

The private/ public precondition of Rex’s secular multicultural society is therefore problematic in its application to Islam in Britain. In a critique of Rex’s multicultural condition, Modood and Kastoryano (2006: 171) argue that people have the right to have their ‘difference’ recognised and supported both within the public and private spheres. Political unity can be achieved without necessarily having cultural uniformity in public spaces (Abbas, 2005: 16).

There is immense diversity of people in Britain representing different socio-political contexts, languages, ethnicities and religions. This is what Modood et al (2006) have termed as the “*multicultural challenge*” - how does the state deal with the assertion of religious, especially Muslim, identities in polities whose self-image is secular ? The assertion of religious identities in public spaces, argue Modood et al (2006) has reignited the multicultural debate and has also challenged the notion of ‘secular’ Europe. It is this complex discussion of the role of religious identities, especially Islam, within contemporary ‘secular’ British multicultural society that this chapter moves onto next.

9.5 British Muslim assertiveness in public spaces: Multiculturalism Re-defined

One of the main obstacles in recognising religion as a legitimate form of public identity is Britain's modern tradition of secularism. Secularism is an integral part of modern European history and is viewed as a defining feature and pre-requisite to modernity (Modood & Kastoryano, 2006: 162-178). The development of a Br-Islamic identity, as discussed in the previous chapter, illustrates the growing importance of religion in Britain. Therefore, egalitarian and critical multiculturalism must incorporate Muslims and this poses a challenge as it is built on the foundations of a secular space.

The scientific rationale of liberal European enlightenment of the eighteenth century in various ways challenged the Christian faith, the authority of the church and the promotion of religion by government. Religion was not compatible with some of the core tenets of liberalism such as humanism, individualism, critical rationality, scientific enquiry and freedom of thought (Locke, 1980[1689]; Rousseau, 1968[1762]). Political life, it was argued, must firstly remain secular as the state is concerned with the social reality of *this* world and not the next. Secondly, it should be centred around rationalism and reason. The emotive faith based logic of religion can undermine scientific rationalism in public life (Parekh, 2006: 191-192). The French Revolution remains one of the most vehement examples of a shift from a religious to a political community in Western Europe.

The separation of church and state, of religion and politics, has become noted as a non-controversial and hegemonic feature of Western societies although this separation is not that straight forward in countries such as the United States of America (de Tocqueville,

1998[1835]) where there is no established church yet is still one of the most religiously observant countries in the world even deciding presidential elections (Greely, 1995: 24-41). Furthermore, the values of religion still have a strong presence in many public functions taken over by the British state such as education, family, legal system, community and voluntary organisations (Norris & Inglehart, 2004).

Also, as Modood and Kastoryano (2006: 169) note, there is no question of the public sphere being morally, ethically or religiously neutral as religiously rooted ‘folk’ cultures have informed public civil society. The continued status of Sundays and Christmas as public holidays in many European states are obvious examples of the continuing influence of Christianity in public ‘secular’ life. Therefore, the separation between politics and religion is not that clear cut despite a public defence of secularism. At best, there is no separation but rather a reciprocal relationship – religious communities need the state to support their culture and the state looks towards religion to reinforce moral virtues such as truth telling, civic volunteering, respect for property amongst others.

Modood and Kastoryano (2006: 162) and others (Voas & Crockett, 2005; Bunting, 2004; Khan, 2008) argue that the increasing visibility⁶⁴ and practice levels of young Muslims and the very public emergence of Islam (through the burning of books in 1989, to the wearing of the hijab and the cartoon protests of 2006) has challenged the very notion of a ‘secular’ Europe, especially in countries such as the United Kingdom, France and Belgium (Kastoryano, 2006; Bousetta & Jacobs, 2006). Muslim assertiveness can also be termed as minority identity assertiveness. As Modood (2006: 39) notes, feminism, gay pride, Quebecois nationalism and the revival of Scottishness are some prominent examples of identity

⁶⁴ Estimated 15 million Muslims in Europe (Parekh, 2006: 179)

movements which have become an important feature in many countries, especially in those in which class politics has declined. The assertiveness of such minority identity movements within the public space has supported the idea of equality as ‘difference’ and for this ‘difference’ to be recognised and supported in the public arena as an equal to others (Modood, 2006: 39).

Modood (2006: 40) argues that inclusion into a ‘political community’ (Parekh, 2000a) should not be viewed as immigrant communities readily accepting the rules of existing polity and its boundaries between the private and the public but rather, public space is essentially created through on-going discursive contestation and political struggles for “*recognition*” (Taylor, 1992) from differing groups. The terms of politics in society, far from being settled, fixed and pre-determined are an object of debate and political discourse (Benhabib, 1992). Muslim assertiveness therefore is interwoven with the concept of a democratic, egalitarian and multicultural public space and the emergence of a Br-Islamic identity is an example of this politics of ‘recognition’.

Amongst others, Muslim assertiveness has included the demand for government funded faith schooling, the choice to wear Muslim clothing especially the hijab (headscarf) in public spaces, the implementation of Islamic Shariah law in family matters, campaigning for religious discrimination to be steeped in law just like race and gender, institutional representation, even handedness amongst religions (for example, nearly a third of state maintained schools were Church of England schools compared to only five Muslim schools in 2006) (Modood, 2006: 44), the demand for public holidays during Muslim festivals, the call to prayer being voiced through a loudspeaker to fellow community members during prayer times and the availability of halal food in public places.

For the most part, British Muslims have succeeded in some areas of institutional and cultural reform. For example, many employers allow Muslim workers time off during the day to perform the daily prayers, many state schools in predominantly Muslim areas close down for the Islamic celebration of Eid twice a year, many Muslim workers get flexible working conditions during Ramadan and the wearing of the hijab (headscarf) for women is now possible in the Metropolitan Police Service (Anwar & Bakhsh, 2003).

However, despite these areas of progress gained through a struggle for “*recognition*” (Taylor, 1992), there is some fear and anxiety held towards many Muslims as there is a perception that Muslims are making “*politically exceptional, culturally unreasonable or theological alien demands upon European states*” (Modood et al, 2006: 3). Parekh (2006: 179-180) has highlighted other areas of European anxiety towards Muslims⁶⁵ which have revived the ‘cultural separatism’ argument⁶⁶:

- Although Muslims have been present en masse for nearly four decades, they have failed to integrate;
- Muslims show no commitment to the democratic traditions and institutions of the West and mock its liberal freedoms. Instead, their value systems of intolerance, authoritarian and theocracy are incompatible with European values;
- Muslims do not feel at home in European societies, preferring to live among themselves, forming self-contained and segregated communities and maintaining only the minimum necessary contact with wider society;
- Muslims make unreasonable demands such as implementation of Islamic shariah laws, funding for faith schools, particular forms of animal slaughter, time off for

⁶⁵ Refer also to ‘Living apart together’ research study by Policy Exchange which also details the nature of ‘Islamicisation’ throughout Europe, (Mirza et al, 2007: 15)

⁶⁶ The ‘cultural separatism’ argument rests on three interrelated factors: 1. Muslims are culturally different to the majority population, 2. Muslims living in the west are critical of the very society that they are a part of, 3. Their values and actions are anti-Western

prayer during working hours and being allowed to wear Muslim clothing in public institutions and feel deeply alienated and resentful when these demands are not met;

- They increasingly view themselves as part of the global Muslim ummah (community) and have little loyalty to the country of settlement and are more concerned about the plight of their fellow Muslim brothers and sisters around the globe;
- Many Muslims also view themselves as morally superior to non-Muslims;
- They are failing in Western education because they do not take it seriously. For example, the recent case of some deeply conservative Muslim parents withdrawing their children from music lessons in one London primary school because they viewed the learning of an instrument as being forbidden in Islam (Ross, 2010: 9). They also over burden their children with irrelevant Islamic education;
- They are failing economically because of poor educational attainment and because they reject the culture of Western economies;
- As a result of the above, they have remained an alienated community, “*in society but not of it*” (Parekh, 2006: 179), full of resentment, anger and a potential source of unrest and violence.

This logic of claims-making, is however, particularly European in context argue Modood et al (2006: 3). The assertiveness of Muslims in public spaces challenges the “*taken for grantedness of secularism in most European societies*” (2006:3) and also forces policy makers to rethink and reopen the secularist debate. Furthermore, the “*problem case*” of Muslim assertiveness in Europe has not only challenged the many faces of multiculturalism but has also exposed the “*secular bias of the discourse and politics of multiculturalism in Europe*” (Modood et al, 2006: 3). As a political condition of egalitarian multiculturalism, Muslims, like other faiths, cultures and immigrant communities in Britain have just claims to difference, recognition and citizenship rights in public spaces. Hellyer (2009), who is a West/Muslim world relations policy consultant, argues that Muslims across Europe should seize upon this pluralist European condition of egalitarian multiculturalism and strive harder to become an integral part of Europe.

Furthermore, a closer examination of the above anxiety held towards Muslims exposes its limitations. For example, very little evidence is offered which supports the claim that Muslims are “*unassimilable*” (Coleman, 2002) within British public space. The reality suggests Farouky (2007) is that Muslims only make up about 3% of the total EU population and that figure is expected to reach no more than 10% by the year 2025. Muslims therefore are very unlikely to become the majority population in Europe as Lewis (2007) and Bawer (2006) have predicted.

In addition, fears of a ‘culture clash’ and the view that British born Muslims are rejecting their British identity is “*exaggerated*” (Manning & Roy, 2007). The majority of Muslims living in the west are law abiding and proud of their triple heritage: national, ethnic and religious. For example, an ICM poll (Hennessey, 2006) of 500 hundred British Muslims in a post 7/7 climate found that four out of five respondents wanted to ‘live in’ and ‘accept’ Western society, with nine out of ten stating that they felt personally “*loyal*” to Britain. Also, even when subjected to blatant discrimination such as not being allowed to build mosques in parts of Italy (Triandafyllidou, 2006: 117-142), Muslims in Europe have either suffered quietly or protested peacefully. Rarely, have they taken the law into their own hands.

There is also a push towards the reformation and modernisation of Islam to be compatible with Western tradition and values (Kamrava, 2006; Gülen, 2006) which has resulted in many overlaps between Islamic and Western values (Parekh, 2006: 179-203). For example, in a recent research study of 1003 Muslims by the independent think tank Policy Exchange, they found that 62% of 16-24 year olds feel they have as much in common with non-Muslims as

Muslims and 59% would prefer to live under British law (Mirza, et al, 2007: 5). Parekh (2006: 184) argues:

“Human dignity, equal human worth, equality of the races, civility, peaceful resolution of differences and reciprocity are all part of the Islamic tradition”

Muslims in Britain, especially in the past twenty years, have entered the public space through their demand for recognition and institutional representation. They have engaged constructively in democratic institutions, civic culture and pluralist dissent mainly through alliances and coalitions with non-Muslim organisations such as the Socialist Party and the Runnymede Trust (Geaves, 2005: 73). The challenge for Britain, therefore, is how to govern a world religion such as Islam which is very public in its expression and as a political condition of egalitarian multiculturalism, accept Muslims as equal social partners despite some cultural and ideological differences.

9.6 Conclusion – the recognition and acceptance of Br-Islam in secular public spaces

“Fifteen years ago we [ethnic minorities] didn’t care, or at least I didn’t care, whether there was any black in the Union Jack. Now not only do we care, we must”

(Stuart Hall, 1992: 259)

“so far it is we [Asian teenagers from Bradford, Brick Lane and Southall] who have had to make all the changes, now it is the turn of the British to accept our existence”

(Tariq Modood, 1992: 264)

The life stories of the six participants of this study make some important contributions to contemporary egalitarian multicultural and nationalist discourse. It is important due to a multitude of factors.

Firstly, the voices of the six respondents at the beginning of this chapter demonstrates that multiculturalism is in actuality a live experiment. It has provided the social tools for the younger generation to practice a version of Br-Islam which provides them with meaning, belonging and acceptance and which also sits comfortably within the multicultural condition of difference and diversity. As Parekh (2006: 199-200) argues, they have undergone a political journey from being Muslims *in* Britain to Muslims *of* Britain and consequently, many have become *Britishized* Muslims.

Secondly, it illustrates that Islam is in actuality compatible with British values and therefore can co-exist peacefully and should not be viewed as a threat (Parekh, 2006: 184; Thomas, 2009). Many young Muslims are being confronted with the question of what it means to be Muslim and British, whether you can be both or need to make a choice? The findings of this study argues that Britishness is a concept that is not fixed and is being contested by many third generation Bangladeshis from Tower Hamlets:

“Just because I am a Muslim, it doesn’t mean that I cannot be British as well” (Azad)

“I have a right to be British. I was born and raised here. No one can take that right away from me” (Saeed)

“As Bangladeshi Muslims, we are different to most British white people. But we can be different and also be British at the same time” (Taiba)

Thirdly, and most importantly, it illustrates that space should be allowed within the public space for religious expression. This challenges the very core of secular Western societies which allocates private spaces for religious worship and expression. The central argument of

this chapter is that the example of the third generation Bangladeshis from Tower Hamlets illustrates that multiculturalism should also incorporate religion as a form of diversity just like other forms of social identities such as race, ethnicity, disability and gender. Their multiple identities must be afforded equal status with institutional support and protection as the many other equality seeking identities in society today.

‘Home’ is viewed as Britain by many third generation Bangladeshis. The Br-Islam that is being developed by the participants demonstrates that this group of Muslims are willingly engaging in a Western lifestyle centred around Western values of democracy, liberalism, and human rights albeit they chose to engage in such a lifestyle in an alternative Islamic ‘halal’ way. Muslims in Britain, therefore, need not to be viewed as the ‘hostile other’ but rather part of the British plural and multicultural ‘us’.

Finally, liberal secularists must be able to handle criticism of their way of social organisation. Like many other minority groups, Muslims are one of the biggest critics of the liberal Western lifestyle. Immigrant communities bring with them different values, customs, and social organisation. The Muslim lifestyle offers an alternative model that does not necessarily put the same importance on liberal attitudes such as personal autonomy, individual choice and liberty. Liberals must be able to handle this and explore and debate the commonalities. Furthermore, British liberal society must view itself as a distinct cultural community just like the many communities present in multicultural society. It cannot present itself as the embodiment of universal values, a higher civilisation, positioning itself as a morally superior belief system. In this respect, Parekh (2006: 195-197) argues that liberal secularism is just one, and not *the*, way of social organisation.

In forging and cementing a public space in multicultural Britain, one of the major obstacles that the British Bangladeshi Muslim community of East London must overcome is the perceived unequal treatment of women. This is still an area of Islamic and Bangladeshi tradition and practice which sits uneasily within a liberal Western discourse. Therefore, this issue needs to be addressed in order to push forward a message of equality and human rights which are part of a more modern and progressive Islamic school of thought (Kamrava, 2006) and are also key values of Western liberal democracies.

The final chapter of this study explores the position of Bangladeshi women in Tower Hamlets and examines in detail the emergence of a distinct gendered identity amongst the three female participants of this study.

Chapter 10

Third generation Bangladeshi girls from Tower Hamlets: using Islam as a platform to construct new meanings of being British, Bangladeshi, Muslim and female

10.0 Introduction

*“At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the topic of Islam, fundamentalism, terrorism, extremism and women’s position in Islam is on many people’s minds, from the local bus driver to the specialist scholar. The discourse in the popular mind is one of the backwardness, violence and barbarity of Islam, Arabs and Muslims. **The oppression of women is a given.** This makes challenging the popular Western stereotype that the veil is a symbol of Muslim women’s oppression an uphill battle, all the more so in light of certain late twentieth-century events in the Muslim world: Iran’s imposition of the chador after Khomeini’s revolution in 1979; the Taliban’s imposition of the burqa after their accession to power in 1997; and the violence perpetrated by radical groups in the name of Islam in Egypt, Israel, Algeria and the like. Does not all this merely confirm that Islam is violent, intolerant and anti-women?”* (Bold added)

(Bullock, 2007: introduction, 38)

It is important to reiterate Bullock’s assertion above that this chapter is written in a socio-political backdrop where the oppression of Muslim women is a “*given*”. This chapter locates the voices of the three females of this study (Sanjida, Zeyba and Taiba) within this wider local, national and international context. I argue, however, that far from being steeped in negativity as the above quote suggests, the religion of Islam provides Sanjida, Zeyba and Taiba with a positive sense of identity and belonging.

I argue that the symbolism of the hijab and membership (actual and ideological) to a religious community which is highly politicised in contemporary times, provides not only confidence

but also belonging, visibility, recognition, sisterhood and voice to many Muslim women in the West (Bullock, 2007; El Guindi, 2000). Contrary to being “*passive victims of oppressive cultures*” (the ‘cultural pathology’ of Muslim women as homebound, passive, docile, oppressed, lacking confidence and dominated by strict fathers, brothers and husbands) (Shain, 2003: 14), many British Bangladeshi Muslim women are actively adapting their culture and religion and establishing a positive Br-Islamic identity for themselves.

Furthermore, Br-Islam is both a resistance and “*negotiation*” (Sanghera & Thapur-Björkert, 2007: 173-191) of Bangladeshi and Western patriarchy⁶⁷ and at the same time fuses elements of both cultures in an attempt to create new meanings of what it means to be British, Bangladeshi, Muslim and female (Choudhury, 2008). The role of Islam in the lives of many Bangladeshi Muslim women in East London is important both symbolically and spiritually. They seek to make sense of Islam as a living entity relevant to their everyday lives inside and outside of their home (Ahmed, 2005). I argue that membership to Br-Islam is also allowing all three of the female participants of this study to resist the greater control to which they are exposed to at home and within their communities (Sahin, 2005) and also to challenge the notion of patriarchy and aspects of traditional Bangladeshi and Muslim culture deemed to be oppressive towards women. As such, the notion of the traditional ‘Bangladeshi woman’ is being contested by the emergence of an Islamically and Western orientated identity. Their identities, are therefore “*dynamic*” rather than static (Basit, 1997).

This chapter is not a theological account of the status of women in Islam although there are references to the origins of the religion and the time of the Prophet Muhammed in the seventh century in trying to determine a more egalitarian theory of the position of women in Islamic

⁶⁷ I subscribe to the view of patriarchy as a system of masculine dominance, power and control over women (refer to Millet, 1970 & Walby, 1990). Patriarchy is also viewed as the maintenance of male privileges (Haw, 1988: 88)

societies. I neither have the knowledge nor the expertise to make such an analysis and leave this for Islamic scholars and theologians to debate (Maqsood, 2003; Rippin, 2006)⁶⁸. This chapter is instead a sociological and ethnographic discussion of the evolving identities of third generation Bangladeshi females in which Islam as a social force plays an important role.

The predominant concern of this chapter is not about Muslim women and the veil⁶⁹. However, for Muslim women, their choice of dress has become the most visible and iconic symbol of Islam in Britain. Therefore it is impossible to untangle a discussion of third generation Bangladeshi female identities in which Islam plays a significant socio-political role from a generic examination of the advantages and limitations of the hijab as discussed by feminists, sociologists and anthropologists (Bullock, 2007; Mernissi, 2003[1975], 1991; El Guindi, 2000). Therefore, a significant section of this chapter is devoted to the ‘hijab’ as a focal point in our analysis of third generation Bangladeshi female identities.

In order to develop the arguments above, this chapter is organised into four sections:

- The first part of this chapter locates the voices of the three female participants in the wider discourse of gender roles within the Bangladeshi culture and Islamic religion;
- The second part of the chapter is a generic discussion of the status of women in Islam which makes a key distinction between spiritual (scriptural) Islam and various cultural interpretation of Islam;

⁶⁸ Refer also to www.channel4.com/culture/microsites/I/Islam_unveiled

⁶⁹ The concept of ‘veiling’ is a generic and complex term which means covering. The words ‘veil’, ‘veiling’ and ‘hijab’ are used interchangeably throughout this chapter and are all in reference to (unless specified otherwise) a choice of women’s dress code associated with the modest and loose covering of the full female body apart from the face and hands. The term hijab also has a trilogy of meanings: 1. To conceal, hide and cover, 2. To lower the gaze with the opposite sex which applies to men as well who must lower their gaze in the presence of unrelated women, 3. In recent times, hijab has also become the common name given to the headscarf worn by Muslim women, pinned at the neck with their faces showing. It is noted that there is a crucial difference between those women who just wear the headscarf and those who wear the face veil (niqab). The reaction to such choice of dress code differs at both an intra-community (Muslims) and societal (non-Muslims) level.

- The third part of this chapter critically examines the role of the veil as either a symbol of ‘oppression’ or ‘liberation’;
- The final part promotes the concept of a positive Br-Islamic identity which is allowing many third generation Bangladeshi women to manage their multiple identities of being a British-born Bangladeshi Muslim woman.

10.1 The importance of Islam: locating *their* voices within the wider debate

The central role of Islam within the lives of the three female participants has already been highlighted in chapter eight. This section is concerned more with the power and voice that is derived as a result of an increasingly important Islamic cultural way of life for Taiba, Sanjida and Zeyba.

Discussions of home, childhood memories, schooling, family life and future aspirations differed between the males and females of this study. Whilst there were many overlaps in terms of experiences of racism, language choice, memories of Bangladesh, it was clear that the females of this study were involved in an additional battle of gender equality both within the private and public sphere. Islam, whether in practice or ideology, provided the females a vehicle through which to strive for greater gender equality or at least engage in the rhetoric of equality:

“err, I have to admit, I’m not the best of Muslims. I mean, I don’t do anything bad like drinking or smoking and going out with boys. I’m just lazy. I should be praying much more and wearing the headscarf all of the time... some of my friends are proper Muslims and I can see how Islam has benefitted them. They are now much more expressive and confident and don’t take crap” (Sanjida)

“I have a lot of time to read now that I am pregnant. I am reading lots and lots about my religion and the more I read, the more sense it makes to me... it is such a beautiful religion especially because it holds women with so much respect... it makes me sad to think that my daadi and mum hold such negative views about women” (Taiba)

Me: *“what is it about Islam that you find most attractive?”*

Zeyba: *“everything”*

Me: *“you’ve gotta give me more than that... what do you mean by ‘everything’?”*

Zeyba: *“err, I mean the ‘whole package’ – everything. It’s so simple and beautiful especially how it treats women. It’s not like how others view it”*

Me: *“what do you mean – who is the ‘other’?”*

[pause]

Zeyba: *“we Muslims get so much negative publicity by non-Muslims. Either we are terrorists or we don’t like Britain. Like I said earlier, I am British, because I was born here and our fathers don’t beat us up all of the time or force us to wear the hijab and err, I personally don’t know anyone who is a terrorist.... I can do and be whatever I want. I am not oppressed”*

The above voices highlight both the diversity of Islamic practice (as discussed earlier in chapter two) and also the important role of religion in creating a gendered identity for Sanjida, Taiba and Zeyba. Sanjida echoes the concept of the ‘lazy Muslim’, who whilst not engaged in the day to day practice of religion such as prayer, is nonetheless ideologically committed to Islam and can see how it benefits women. Islam makes *“sense”* to Taiba because of its *“beaut[y]”* and she is keen to use religion as a vehicle to strive for gender equality and also challenge the traditional role of Bangladeshi women as practised by her grandmother and mum. Like Taiba, it is the simplicity and beauty, what she refers to as the *“whole package”*, of Islam that Zeyba finds most appealing. Also, like the others, she contests that the treatment of women in Islam is positive. However, her admission and keenness to reiterate that she *“can do and be whatever [she] want[s] [and that she is not] oppressed”* suggests that her views are shaped by her family structure, her class position and her liberal values and lifestyle.

All three present a very positive account of the role of religion in their lives, especially the treatment of women, without much critical vigour. As we will see later on in this chapter, however, viewed from a feminist standpoint, there are some areas of debate regarding the treatment of women in Islam. The contentious symbolism of the hijab and especially the stories of Sanjida suggest that patriarchy, tradition and culture still play a significant role in the shaping of Bangladeshi female identity despite the rhetoric of gender equality above.

It is important to note that not all women experience oppression and patriarchy in the same way. Class, income and education factors play an important role in the practice of patriarchy in many Bangladeshi households. For example, there were gendered and class differences between the aspirations of Sanjida and Zeyba. Zeyba, whose background, income and family education mirrored a middle class lifestyle did not place much importance on future motherhood. Whereas, Sanjida, who was steeped in a working class lifestyle, wanted to maintain her “*culture*” through marriage, language, children and domestic chores. It is therefore misleading to generalise the experiences of Bangladeshi women because of cultural, linguistic and geographical commonalities as there are many complexities involved.

Taiba and Sanjida were actively resisting the “*backwards*” and “*old fashioned*” idea of the ‘traditional Bangladeshi woman’ (somebody who is homebound, family-orientated, quiet, passive and docile) (Choudhury, 2008; Bhavani & Ahmad, 2006; Basit, 1997):

“I’m not like my mother and grandmother. If I don’t agree with something then I will let others know. I am not a ‘yes’ person. I have my own mind, my own bank account and am in control of my own future” (Taiba)

“My cousin sister wanted a love marriage. I don’t see anything wrong with that. It’s her choice. Even though I am young, she approached me to approach her parents. That’s because she knows I speak my mind and don’t beat around the bush. I do respect my elders but if something needs to be said then I don’t hold back” (Sanjida)

Sanjida's admission that she does "*respect [her] elders*" points towards her high regard for some deep ingrained cultural family values. This, I argue, highlights that whilst they hold similar values to that of their mothers generation, many younger generation of Bangladeshi girls such as Sanjida and Taiba are more willing to express areas of disagreement or what Archer et al (2010) have referred to as working class girls "*speaking my mind*".

This shift in attitude between the generations is explained by a number of factors:

Table 3: Factors explaining the differences in attitudes between 1st/2nd Vs 3rd/4th generations of British Bangladeshi women

1. Greater encouragement from mothers for their daughters to access education and employment (Choudhury, 2008; Aston et al, 2007; Bhavani, 2006);
2. Diversification in employment patterns which has witnessed the emergence of a younger professional class of women (EOC, 2007; Bunting, 2004; Basit, 1997). In her discussion with over 1,949 Bangladeshis, Gavron (2005) argues that active and increasing participation in employment and higher education has led to more independence and more British educated Bangladeshi women are taking responsibility for their own lives in terms of careers or partner choices. For example, Taiba wants to go into youth work, Zeyba has aspirations to become a scientist and Sanjida wants to become a teacher;
3. Change in socialisation patterns with many younger women influenced by mainstream British culture, therefore, moving away from the domestic sphere and accessing other social spaces such as youth clubs, travelling abroad, sporting activities, universities, and social outings such as restaurants and cinema trips (Lewis, 2007: 54; Din, 2006: 126; Gavron, 2005). These changes are impacting the "*expression*" of Islam in Europe (Roald, 2001: 300);
4. Enhancement in educational attainment. For example, 55% of Bangladeshi girls compared to 41% Bangladeshi boys attained five or more A* to C grades at GCSE level in 2004 (National Statistics First Release, DfES, 2005) and even outperformed white British boys in 2006 (DfES, 2007);
5. Generally more vocal against a perceived sense of injustice than their mothers. For example, Sanjida would like to "*spit back [and] slap*" the man who spat at her father;
6. The higher literacy levels amongst the third generation means that they have access to a variety of literature regarding Islam. As a result, many daughters of the second generation are far more devout in their practice of Islam (in their interpretation, their dress, praying) than their mothers (Choudhury, 2008; Ahmed, 2005). Furthermore, they are able to display a literal version of Islam that pushes for gender equality as opposed to the Bangladeshi cultural version of Islam followed by many of their mothers which is mainly based on folkish local rituals and tradition from rural villages of Bangladesh (Parekh, 2006)

As a result of these socio-political changes between the generations, it is argued that the younger generation of women are more confident, vocal, visible and politically active.

However, despite following different paths to their mothers and grandmothers and becoming more financially autonomous and career focused, Bangladeshi and Pakistani women still have some of the highest rates of economic inactivity (those who are neither in employment or unemployment) compared to other women of minority ethnic background. For example, compared to Indian women (55 per cent), only 22 per cent of Bangladeshi women aged 16 and over and 27 per cent of Pakistani women were economically active in 2006 (Babb et al, 2006: 4-5; ONS: 2004). This suggests there are still structural and cultural constraints which restrict many Bangladeshi women engaging with mainstream society (Abbas, 2005). Barriers to engagement such as racism, sexism and anti-Muslim prejudice continue to remain important areas of concern (EOC, 2007: 24). Furthermore, these figures also suggest that there is still much internal cultural conflict and resistance to the idea of the ‘modern liberated Bangladeshi Muslim woman’.

In regards to the increasing popularity of Islam in the lives of Taiba, Sanjida and Zeyba, the question is whether they have rejected one patriarchal culture (Bangladeshi) and entered into another one (Islamic) which although forwards many rights to women, nonetheless also chains them within a culture where men are still deemed as the ‘protector’ and ‘guardian’ of ‘their’ women (Mernissi, 2003[1975]: 12). I argue that the increased “*religiosity*” (Akhtar, 2005) amongst women must be viewed within the context of a new Br-Islam which is synonymous with a modern lifestyle. It is an Islam which emphasises women’s rights, education, career and motherhood, fashion, banking and socialising within an Islamic framework (Warburton, 2007; Kermani, 2006; Scott, 2004). It is this version of Islam, I

argue, that Zeyba, Sanjida and Taiba are trying to embrace whilst resisting the notion of the homebound, powerless image of the Bangladeshi woman:

“I meet up with my girlfriends every Thursday evening and go to smoke shisha (flavoured tobacco) in Mile End. It’s a chilled place and the owners have segregated seating which means that its ok Islamically and we can also let our hair down and have fun without being harassed by boys for our phone numbers” (Taiba)

“I try as often as I can to take my mum along to Islamic talks in the East London Mosque. She needs to understand Islam better. There are certain things that she does – like the clothes that she wears – which are un-Islamic. I try and correct her as much as possible” (Zeyba)

Taiba’s “*shisha*” smoking sessions with her girlfriends can be considered controversial in Sylheti Bangladeshi culture as it represents a departure from a more traditional homebound image of Bangladeshi women and also involves ‘smoking’ in an arena more associated with men. However, in Taiba’s mind, she is doing nothing wrong as the fact that she engages in “*shisha*” smoking in an environment which has “*segregated seating*” means that it is “*ok Islamically*”. Taiba also tells me how her “*hijabi*” friend (Lipi) who is very religious drives her to the shisha bar in a car which has “*blacked out*” windows so that Lipi can maintain a sense of separation (*pardah*) from men. This, again, highlights the syncretism of modern youth culture with religious spirituality as Lipi drives a fast sports car, playing loud “*hip hop music*” whilst maintaining *pardah*. Also, Zeyba is critical of her mothers “*un-Islamic*” dress choice and is keen to “*correct her as much as possible*”. Both of these examples serve as a reminder of the increased “*religiosity*” and the emergence of a trendy and modern Br-Islam in the lives of Zeyba and Taiba.

This negotiation of identities, however, remains a complex and painful process illustrated in particular by the contradictory voice of Sanjida. The image of the new liberated Bangladeshi woman remains a myth for many third generation Bangladeshi girls. There is mounting tension between Br-Islamic modernity and Bangladeshi tradition. For example, Taiba is

critical of her gendered upbringing which revolved around cooking, cleaning, no interaction with boys, a very strict father and the expectation that she was to marry “*one of her cousin brothers from Bangladesh*”. Taiba has resisted such a cultural lifestyle by moving out of home.

Also, Sanjida’s inner battle to reconcile her Bangladeshi culture and tradition with the fact that she is a British born teenager with a different Western way of life (‘culture’) is evident in the confusion of her gendered role and responsibilities. Sanjida feels that a “*good*” Bangladeshi girl (what she also refers to as “*Miss goody goody two shoes*”) needs to be able to cook, clean, keep her husband happy and rear children which according to Archer (2002:364) are viewed as ‘normal’ components of Muslim femininity:

“I want to have lots of children and look after them just like my mum but I also want to have a career. There is nothing wrong in doing both things but I reckon it will be hard. [pause]I do want to get married and settle down as soon as I finish my studies and make my family proud.... I don’t mind being a housewife but I hope my future mother in law allows me to work”

Sanjida also wants to pursue a teaching career but acknowledges that it will be difficult to be a career woman as well as a mother and daughter in law. Reiterating the importance of “*cooking*” and the ability to rear children as important elements of Bangladeshi female culture, Sanjida suggests:

“kids, cook, mark [pause] mark, kids, cook. Its gonna be hard”

This reference to her “*future mother in law*” giving her permission to work points to an important element of Bangladeshi culture where there is a continued matriarchal power struggle in an attempt to control the junior women in the family hierarchy. I argue that it can also be considered an attempt to maintain tradition and ‘pass down’ cultural values through the different generations. Sanjida’s dilemma above echoes one of the key findings from

Basit's (1997) in-depth study of 24 British Muslim girls and their parents in which she found that the girls wanted to 'hang on' to their Asian and Muslim roots whilst finding ways to adapt these identities within the context of British society.

Maintaining Bangladeshi culture and tradition through language, gender roles and rituals were important for Sanjida. I argue that despite the emergence of a seemingly gender neutral Br-Islam, Sanjida's defence of the "good" Bangladeshi girl highlights the importance of the politics of patriarchy that still regulate many local community affairs. It is argued that there remains an unequal gender space within the Bangladeshi community which does not afford the same rights and liberties to many of its female members. There is still a great tension between progressive Br-Islam and traditional conservative Bangladeshi Muslim patriarchy. Therefore, the 'cultural pathology' argument (Shain, 2003) still holds weight and is real for some Bangladeshi women despite the rhetoric of gender equality.

10.2 The status of women in Islam: challenging some popular myths and stereotypes

It is important to make a distinction between the traditional Bangladeshi cultural view of women (discussed above) and what the religion of Islam advocates in order to understand the appeal of Islam to many second and third generation Bangladeshi women in Britain. Historically, there have been three main schools of thought in the discussion of women and Islam. Firstly, there are those who have defended what is believed in Islam to be the divinely ordained difference between the sexes (Stowasser, 1987; Haddad, 1980)⁷⁰. Such commentators push forward the 'different but equal' argument, although feminists such as

⁷⁰ This essentialist view of women is also true in other religions such as Catholicism (Manning, 1999: 67; Pope John Paul II, 1988)

Berktay (1993) and Keddie (1991) have challenged such a notion to be ‘different and inferior’.

Secondly, there are some Muslim feminists who have attempted a more progressive interpretation of the Qu’ran and early Islamic history and argue that Islam in fact has a very special status for women (El-Saadawi, 1982; al-Hibri, 1982). Such a reading of Islamic history argues that women have played an important role in Muslim societies especially in public spaces such as education, the labour market and political activity. In Syria and Egypt, for example, there were very prominent Muslim women landowners and businesswomen in the thirteenth century and onwards (Meriwether, 1993; Marsot, 1996). In more recent history, Kabeer (1991: 78-115) demonstrates the important role that Bangladeshi women played in the protest movement against West Pakistan in their struggle for independence in 1971. These women were politically active and many even took up arms against the West Pakistani army (Autograph ABP, 2008).

Thirdly, there is a growing school of thought which argues that Islam is intrinsically patriarchal and inimical to women’s rights (Sabbah, 1984; Ghassoub, 1987). Popular conservative books such as *Bashishti Zewar* written by the Islamic scholar Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanvi (2002 [1333]) support the view that Islam is inherently misogynist. The book assumes that women are subordinate to and in the possession of men, and that the ideal for women is to stay at home and stay secluded from all but family and selected female friends (Metcalf, 1990). Other traditional texts such as *Riyadh us Saliheen* by Imam Nawawi further depict women as the property of men and propagates violence against women (quoted in Lewis, 2007: 98-99).

It must be noted that the viewpoint that women are subordinate to men is ahistorical, deeply conservative and located within certain cultural contexts. Furthermore, it does not correlate with the reality and changes in aspirations and attitudes of many Muslim women in the twenty first century such as the three female participants of this study. Muslim feminists such as Ahmed (1992) and Mernissi (2003[1975]; 1991) argue that many women have started to take more prominent roles in public life since the start of the modernization and nation-building projects post independence in many Muslim countries. Ahmed (1992: 240-244) argues that at all levels of the social system in many Islamic countries (cultural, legal, economic), women have been throughout history controlled, subordinated, economically marginalised and conceptualised as inferior human beings to men. It has only been over the course of the last century that women in some countries have attained civil and political rights and gained access to educational and professional life.

For example, the position of Muslim women in Western European countries has evolved over the past ten years. Many women are rebelling against highly sexist cultural conventions and using the religion of Islam as a format to push for gender equality. As a result, many Muslim women are voting in elections, standing up for public office, going onto higher and further education, carving out professions and careers for themselves and resisting the patriarchal dominance of their fathers, husbands and brothers (Bhavani & Ahmad, 2006; Sanghera & Thapur-Björkert, 2007; Ameli & Merali, 2006; EOC, 2007). Furthermore, 4 out of 51 local councillors in Tower Hamlets in 2010 were Bangladeshi women.⁷¹ The Labour Party MP in Tower Hamlets in 2010 is also a Bangladeshi woman (Rushnara Ali).

⁷¹ www.towerhamlets.gov.uk

Moroccan feminist Fatima Mernissi (2003[1975]) has added weight to Ahmed's (1992) argument in her view that the ingrained cultural view of women as active sexual beings in many Muslim countries has resulted in stricter regulation and control of women's sexuality which is perceived as a threat to civilised society. However, the requisites of modernization in the Muslim world, argues Mernissi, are incompatible with traditional Muslim structures resulting in the public de-segregation of sexuality allowing many Muslim women to access the labour and education markets which is necessary for the capitalist production process.

These nation-building and modernization projects have thrust women out of the domestic sphere and into "*classrooms, offices and factories*" challenging the ideology of male supremacy and in turn society's gender balance (Mernissi, 2003[1975]: 15). Mernissi argues that the need to modernise has not only challenged the traditional Moroccan family structure in becoming more nuclear than extended, but the new found financial autonomy in both men and women has also redefined the male/ female relationship challenging traditional/ Arab systems of male dominance. Such a challenge to patriarchy took place in Egypt during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries according to historian Margot Badran (1991: 201-236). Badran argues that many Egyptian Muslim women did not readily submit to the strictures of religious fundamentalism as interpreted by men but were active participants with their own versions of the ways in which Islam might further their gender interests.

Mernissi argues that contrary to what is often perceived, Islam does not advocate the theory of women's inherent inferiority to men. Islam as a religion is egalitarian in ethos and places women's rights at the core of its ideology. It advocates the potential equality between both sexes (Ahmed, 2006). The inequality, argues Mernissi (2003[1975]: 19) is not a product of a biological, ideological or theological concept of women's inferiority, but is the outcome of

specific social institutions, led by men, designed to restrict the power of women through segregation and legal subordination through family laws.

Furthermore, in her examination of the origins of Islam in the seventh century, Mernissi (1991) notes that women were granted full and equal citizenship. The women who migrated from tribal Mecca to Medina enjoyed the status of *sahabiyat* (full citizenship) and were involved in the democratic management of society, especially in military and political affairs. As examples, Mernissi (1991: 4, 192) cites the wife of the Prophet Muhammed A'isha who led an armed opposition against the caliph who ruled at that time, and the socialite Sukayna, both of whom were important political figureheads during early Islam. Mernissi (1991: vii-viii) argues:

“... we Muslim women can walk into the modern world with pride, knowing that the quest for dignity, democracy, and human rights, for full participation in the political and social affairs of our country, stems from no imported Western values, but is a true part of the Muslim tradition”

Those who have denied women equal rights over the course of the past 1400 years have done so because of “*profit*” and “*self interest*” (Mernissi, 1991: vii). It is the Muslim male elite who have deliberately presented a misogynistic and patriarchal version of Islam as the rights of women conflicted with their interests and ideology of male supremacy both within the domestic and public sphere. Islamic history and memory, therefore, has been deliberately “*supervised*”, “*managed*” and manipulated by those in positions of power (the male elite) (El Sadaawi, 1980).

Enhancing the thoughts presented above by Mernissi, sociologist Katherine Bullock (2007, herself a convert to Islam) is keen to emphasise the difference between the status of women

in Islam and the status of women in a male-biased cultural practice of the faith and it is this distinction which is attractive to many third generation Bangladeshi females from East London. As Taiba argues:

“Most people in and outside of our community are ignorant about the Islamic history of women. [pause] They should attend conferences, visit websites, read themselves and speak more to lots of young Muslim girls... they will find out that there is a difference between the Islamic view of women and the Bangladeshi backwards view. Us younger girls are different to our mums mostly because we are not afraid to speak out and because we have more knowledge about Islam”

Many negative headlines and images of Muslim men practicing polygamy, women covering up head to toe in public, slavery, women being stoned to death, family law heavily biased towards men, total obedience towards husbands in marriage, sexual segregation, easy male divorce, seclusion, amongst others, have been associated with Muslim women. Whilst this is true in many cultures and societies across the world (El Saadawi, 1980), Bullock (2007) argues that Islam, as opposed to the cultural interpretation of it, places women in a position of dignity, respect and equality.

Kandiyoti (1991) argues for a fourth category to be added in any discussion of women in Islam. Kandiyoti argues that the disadvantaged position of women in Muslim societies has less to do with religious doctrine and more to do with the modern nation state which reproduces gender inequalities through a gendered construction of citizenship. For example, the nation building project of Bangladesh post independence in 1971 was caught in a diplomatic balancing act between keeping European development projects and aid agencies content by promoting family planning, education, employment in public offices to women and also pandering to the patriarchal instincts of the conservative right in Bangladeshi society and the oil rich Gulf states who were pumping foreign aid into the Bangladeshi economy. This diplomatic balancing act eventually caved in to pressure from the conservative right

with Bangladesh being declared an Islamic state in 1988. Aid from the Gulf states strengthened the role of the madrassa (Islamic schools) and also strengthened the position of the religious parties advocating stricter controls on women (Kabeer, 1991). The evolving position of women in Bangladesh is a good example of how the disadvantaged position of Muslim women in some countries has been determined more by state policies and external market forces than by religious ideology.

One of the key difficulties with the complex issue of the status of women in Islam is the problem of interpretation. There is a strong tradition within Islam of the sanctity of Qu'ranic verses, the stories and actions of the Prophet Muhammed and his companions (the hadith) and a complex debate between scholars of Islam as to the meanings and interpretations of the Qu'ranic verses and the hadith. The tradition of 'interpretation' opens Islam up to manipulation and often leads to grey areas in important matters.

For example, differences of opinion over the issue of the hijab between Islamic scholars was and still remains a marked feature of Islam (Roald, 2001). Bullock (2007) notes that there are many Muslim women across the globe who have engaged in an 'un-veiling' trend under the conviction that the hijab is in fact not a religiously required dress. Followers of such a trend argue that the Qu'ran does not specifically refer to a headcover, but asks women to dress modestly by covering the chest area. This interpretation refutes the more widely held belief that modesty asks women to cover their hair as well as the shoulders and chest areas. This one example of the complexities behind interpretation illustrates the difficulty of branding all Muslim women under the broad banner of 'oppression'. There are, for example, tensions within the British Muslim communities between conservative followers of Islam who are

critical of those who do not wear the hijab and the modern progressives who denounce those who wear the niqab (face mask).

10.3 The importance of the ‘hijab’ as a marker of or resistance against patriarchy

As an obvious visual symbol, I argue that the hijab “*communicate[s] meaningfully with others... a crucial part*” of female, Bangladeshi Muslim identity (Hall, 1990: 222; 1997: 29). The hijab is also the “*most visible marker of ‘otherness’*” and denotes ‘difference’ and ‘subordination’ (Ask and Tjomsland, 1998: 48). Therefore, the symbolism of the hijab and a discussion of Bangladeshi women in general must be located within the concepts of ‘otherization’ and orientalist theory discussed earlier in chapter two. White (1992: 4) argues that the discourse of Bangladeshi women as a visible ‘other’ is not neutral. It arises from and reproduces certain relations of power. This thinking has helped the West to maintain hegemony over the oriental ‘other’ and legitimise existing systems of political domination and subordination

The case of the schoolgirl Shabina Begum from Luton taking her school to the High Court over her right to wear her religious dress to school in 2005 (Mendick, 2005), Jack Straw’s comments over his constituents wearing the niqab (full face veil) during meetings (Taylor & Dodd, 2006), the classroom assistant Aishah Azmi who refused to remove the face veil whilst in class and was subsequently fired from her job in 2006 (Male, 2006; Grice, 2006) and the French banning of the hijab and other religious symbols in public schools in 2004, amongst other incidents, have brought the issue of the hijab, veil and a general discussion of the status of women and women’s rights in Islam into public, media and political prominence.

The symbolism and practicality of the hijab was important to Sanjida, Zeyba and Taiba. For example, Zeyba viewed the hijab as a “*public statement*” of her “*inner faith*”. She has been wearing the hijab since the age of eleven and views it as the “*most important*” part of her identity. Taiba understands the importance of the hijab as a statement of both her gender and her faith. She aspires to wear the hijab permanently when she feels that she is spiritually ready to do so. Like Taiba, Sanjida is also aware of the importance of the hijab, but takes a more flexible approach. For example, she wears the headscarf mainly during family get togethers and weddings and abandons the hijab when she is at school or when she is “*out with her mates*”. Her attitude towards the hijab is governed by her “*deep faith*” as well as her desire to bring “*respectability*” upon her family.

There is an ongoing ferocious debate between feminists, sociologists and politicians over the issue of the hijab. One camp whose followers include the Moroccan feminist Mernissi (2003 [1975]; 1991) and the British politician Tessa Jowell (Male, 2006) believe that the ‘veiling’ of Muslim women represents a symbol of female oppression and subjugation and is forced upon women by men in a patriarchal system. The other camp argue that the veil ‘liberates’ women and that there are multiple meanings behind the wearing of the ‘veil’ (Bullock, 2007; El Guindi, 2000).

In a critique of Mernissi, Bullock (2007) and El Guindi (2000) have suggested that there are “*multiple*” meanings behind a woman’s choice to wear the veil. Bullock argues that the veil liberates Muslim women away from the male gaze and also acts as a symbol of resistance to the consumer capitalist culture of the twenty first century. In a more anthropological analysis, El Guindi (2000) argues that Muslim women have covered themselves as both an affirmation of cultural identity and resistance to colonial penetration of Muslim lands. The veil, therefore,

acts as a symbol of resistance (El Guindi, 2000). The following section of this chapter analyses this debate in the context of the modern British socio-political climate which holds negative views of the veil and is underpinned by a historic Western colonial/ oriental desire to unveil women as a symbol of liberation and modernity (Bullock, 2007: 1-34; al-Din, 1990[1928]; Scott, 2010).

In her study of sixteen Muslim women who wore the hijab in Toronto, Canada in 1996, Bullock (2007) challenges the popular Western notion that the veil is a symbol of women's oppression and that Muslim women are utterly subjugated and controlled by the men in their lives. The notion that the veil is a symbol of Muslim women's oppression forced upon them by men, argues Bullock (2007: introduction, 25), is a "*constructed*" image that does not represent the experience of all those who wear it. Highly critical of liberal Muslim feminists such as Mernissi who have argued that the choice to cover for Muslim women is 'un-liberating', Bullock contests that the notion of the veil as being an oppressive feature of Islam is based on liberal Western understandings of 'equality' and 'liberty' that preclude other ways of thinking about 'equality' and 'liberty'. Furthermore, Bullock argues that the veil is a symbol of resistance and liberation against Western consumer capitalist culture which commodifies and exploits the female body in the name of profit. The hijab also empowers many women against the 'beauty myth' and the ideal of the slim woman (Bordo, 1993) and counters the 'male gaze' which radical feminists such as Dworkin (1995) and MacKinnon (1995) argue de-humanises and objectifies the female body. Sanjida, humorously, backs up such an assertion:

"there is always a pressure to look nice... sometimes, I just cannot be bothered with make up and nice clothes. I just throw the headscarf over my head and go out [laughing]"

Bullock (2007) argues that there are three ways of analysing the status of women and the role of the hijab in Islamic cultures and societies across the globe. Firstly, there is what Bullock refers to as the *mainstream pop culture view*. This school of thought argues that Muslim women are completely and utterly subjugated by men and that the veil is a symbol of this subjugation. This is a very simplistic view steeped in colonial and oriental discourse and imagery and pushed forward by many Western media institutions. Western politicians also prey on such imagery when asserting influence in the Muslim world geo-politically in an attempt to ‘liberate’ and ‘civilise’ them (Rogers, 2002).

Secondly, there is the *liberal feminist* (Haw, 1998: 87-88) view which attracts both Muslims and non-Muslims. Agents of such a viewpoint have a deep understanding of Islam and are also committed to the issue of women’s rights. Underpinned by liberal concepts such as individualism, liberty, equality, human rights and the meaning and nature of oppression, they believe that Islam, like all patriarchal religions, subordinates and holds misogynistic views about women (Holm, 1994; Manning, 1999: 78; Hamington, 1995; Daly, 1985[1968]: 53). For example, many of the teachers interviewed in Farley’s study (2009) of whether a state school in Luton should offer the hijab as part of the school uniform for Muslim students, viewed the hijab as a symbol of oppression and a way of constantly reminding the girls of their cultural responsibilities. One teacher considered the hijab to be repressive and a form of “*control*” by parents. However, Ramazanoglu (1986) highlights a point of tension in such a liberal feminist stance. On the one hand, Muslim women cannot be judged to be oppressed when they are simply celebrating the Muslim way of life, and on the other hand, many Western feminists argue that they know Muslims are oppressed even if they do not, because they possess universal criterion of oppression, external to Islam, which identifies veiling as oppressive.

Thirdly, there is what Bullock refers to as the *contextual approach* which is a line of argument developed by anthropologists and historians. This school of thought problematises the issue of veiling and the status of women in Islamic communities. Such an approach listens to the voices of veiled women and attempts to understand the meaning of the social practice of veiling from the inside. The central question for followers of such an approach like Bullock is whether the issues experienced by women in the West and the issues raised by Western feminists are universally applicable (Tucker, 1983; Fernea, 1989 & 1998; Fernea & Bezirgan, 1977; Wikan, 1982). Lazreg (1988) notes that feminists from the East have frequently adopted Western feminist categories without challenging their relevance and applicability to the lives of women living in the East. This has led to a movement in the 1990s for an indigenous and not imported feminism to take shape relevant to the lives of Muslim women (Yamani, 1996; Karam, 1998; Ahmed, 1992). Although criticised for its cultural relativism as a banner under which the oppression of women is legitimised and therefore made to appear tolerable (Berkday, 1993), the *contextual approach* to the study of women in Islam argues that women wear the veil for different reasons and are informed in their choices by context, local customs and rituals, social environment, political and economic climate and cultural lifestyle (El Saadawi, 1980).

The experiences of Sanjida, Taiba and Zeyba add weight to the *contextual approach* as a useful analytical and conceptual tool in examining their identities. Although there are many overlaps, their differing stories, as stated earlier, highlight that it is too simplistic to argue that all Bangladeshi girls experience the hijab in the same way:

“I was forced to wear the hijab when I was young.... I do not wear it anymore. I will again, inshallah, when I am ready” (Taiba)

“My parents have never told me to wear it.... I choose to wear the hijab. It’s an important part of my identity as a Muslim female” (Zeyba)

“Sometimes I wear the headscarf when I am out. Other times I forget. It’s important as it is a mark of respectability and deep faith” (Sanjida)

Farley’s study (2009) of 92 Muslim girls in a Luton school enhances the complexity of hijab voiced by Taiba, Zeyba and Sanjida above. Farley and others (Jawad and Benn, 2003: 31-32; El Guindi, 2000; Iqbal, 2010) found that Muslim women wore the hijab for a variety of reasons: religion, culture, fashion, community, identity, privacy, space, protection, power, autonomy, to combat male harassment, respect and confidence. The hijab is also a public expression of personal identity and a symbol of social status to many women (Watson, 1994; Franks, 2000; Bullock, 2007: 85-135). Farley (2009) also argues that many Muslim women are conscious of practical reasons behind the hijab including pleasing parents, lower costs for clothing and less time spent on grooming hair. Like Sanjida, many of Farley’s participants also exerted considerable flexibility in wearing the hijab. Some wore the hijab only at school, some only wore it during prayer time and some wore it on a regular basis. Therefore, there are personal, aesthetic, social, religious and political meanings behind the hijab (Tarlo, 2009). Veiling as a social practice is therefore not fixed or unidirectional, rather it is a dynamic process.

It is also too simplistic to argue that all Muslim women are oppressed and that the hijab is a symbol of this oppression as argued by the *popular culture* and *liberal feminist* views above. History, context and social environment assert that not all Muslim women undergo the same experience. There are, as Bullock (2007: 180) notes “*sociological complexities of covering*”. I argue that just like there are multiple identities experienced by the third generation

Bangladeshis from Tower Hamlets, there are also multiple meanings behind the concept of veiling.

There are, of course, many thousands of Muslim women around the globe who are living as second class citizens to men, controlled and subjugated, the veil is not a choice or option, but rather mandatory in a sexually segregated and patriarchal society. These women suffer injustices at the hands of their husbands, family, village and society. The Taliban of Afghanistan were an obvious example of such a misogynist society in recent times (Hosseini, 2007; Skaine, 2002; Follain & Zoya, 2002) where women were denied education, confined to the home and barred from public life. There is also a growing body of literature from Muslim women who are speaking out against their disadvantaged position as women in Islamic communities (Ali, 2007; Amara, 2006; Manji, 2005).

Equally, however, there are many thousands of Muslim women who, in the context of a British society that allows freedom of dress, have chosen to 're-veil' themselves due to both religious and personal reasons. There are also a body of Muslim women who are deeply religious whilst choosing not to wear the veil. Muslim women, like the Muslim population in general as discussed earlier in chapter two, are not a homogeneous group. There are important variations encountered in women's conditions both within and across Muslim societies (Kandiyoti, 1991: 1; Sedira, 2003: 58). They do not experience wearing the hijab in the same way. As Bullock (2007: 38) notes:

“Though Muslim women may share ‘Islam’, they come from a wide variety of class, race, and ethnic backgrounds. Muslim women wear hijab for different reasons... [for example] the meaning of hijab for a woman in Iran can be completely different than the meaning of hijab for a woman in Toronto... the point is not to assume that just because they look similar, they are similar”

This last point by Bullock is important as it raises the possibility that some Muslim women may not experience Islam or the veil as restrictive or oppressive. This was the case for Zeyba who exerts the notion of ‘choice’:

“I am not oppressed and my father did not make me wear the headscarf [pause]. In fact, he can’t understand why me and sisters choose to wear hijab. He thinks that wearing the hijab will be bad for our careers”

At an intra-community level, the three female participants of this study represent the variety of experiences that Bullock has referred to above. Only Zeyba wears the hijab all the time, whilst Sanjida wears it sometimes depending on occasion and Taiba whilst not wearing the hijab, is deeply rooted in her faith.

There are several limitations with Bullock’s alternative theory of the hijab. Firstly, I argue that the hijab does not necessarily remove the male gaze away from the woman. In contemporary Western society, for example, the wearing of the hijab has become somewhat of a fashion statement with many Muslim women wearing bright coloured attractive headscarves, designer clothes, expensive footwear and extensive facial make up (Scott, 2004; Ahmed, 2004; Hoque, 2004c; www.thehijabshop.com). Fanshawe (2006) has referred to this fusion of fashion and religion as the emergence of the ‘hijabi barbie’. Readily admitting to sometimes spending up to “two hours” pinning the headscarf over her hair in order to “look good”, I posed such an assertion to Zeyba:

Me: *“you said that the hijab is a ‘public statement’ of your ‘inner faith’ and you have also equated your choice of dress with words such as modesty and covering. However, I can see that you are wearing a very glamorous headscarf with beautiful jewellery and trendy clothes. Do you not find this a contradiction ?”*

Zeyba: *“why can’t I look good? Why can’t I be fashionable and also be religious? Just because I wear the latest clothes, it doesn’t mean that I am a bad Muslim girl”*

Me: *“I didn’t mean to imply that you may be a ‘bad Muslim girl’ based on your choice of dress. But can you see how it may look to other people ? If the religious objective is to be modest and not to attract attention especially from men, then can you see how this maybe viewed as a contradiction?”*

Zeyba: *“I can see what you are trying to say [pause]. I guess my reply to you is that my dress choice is my statement of faith and individuality. And err, if men can’t keep their grubby eyes of me because of it, then that’s their problem”*

This interview exchange illustrates the importance of how dress choice for Zeyba is enabling her to negotiate her many identities of being a Westernised Muslim teenager. Also, I argue that her question *“why can’t I be fashionable and also be religious”* is a valid one and points towards the emergence of a trendy Br-Islamic culture.

I argue that this fusion of clothing can also be viewed as a resistance against Bangladeshi patriarchal attempts to demand perfect reproductions of nation and culture (Mani, 2002: 125). However, as well as looking attractive for themselves and wearing the hijab for spiritual/religious reasons, it can be argued that many young women are also giving in to the male gaze.

Secondly, the argument that women who veil themselves in public are less concerned about the female body ideal and beauty myth is exaggerated. Veiling does not equate with contentment with the body. The woman may be unhappy about the way she looks and may continue to have issues of low self-esteem despite the public expression of her personal identity via the hijab. Thirdly, the wearing of the veil maybe the opposite of the flesh exposing industry of Western advertising, film and pornography but that does not necessarily make veiling any less patriarchal. I argue that in many Muslim societies, the patriarchal hegemonic desire for men to control women is confused with the issue of ‘choice’ for women to veil themselves. In both the Western flesh exposing capitalist culture and Muslim ‘covering’ culture, it can be argued that it is the men controlling women or the women internalising the male gaze and reacting to his desires via dress code (Alibhai-Brown, 2006;

Parmer & Amos, 1981). Veiling in certain societies is therefore a choice made within a patriarchal framework (Hessini, 1994: 54).

Fourthly, Bullock's alternative theory of the veil brackets all men as sexualised beings constantly de-humanising women as sexual objects. This is a generalised and essentialised view of men. Finally, do Muslim women really 'choose' to cover themselves? Feminists such as Macleod (1991), Helie-Lucas (1994) and Afshar (1991) question whether Muslim women predominantly living in the Middle East really choose to cover or are coerced and subtly brainwashed into such a choice. However, despite these limitations with Bullock's alternative theory of the veil, the hijab represents a symbol of resistance and helps forge a minority identity against the West:

"... in choosing the hijab, they are constructing a Muslim identity, a minority identity in the face of the dominant (Western) culture's message about women... they use their Islamic heritage as a way to resist, rebel against and counter" (Bullock, 2007: 191)

It is the argument of this chapter that whether veiled or not, membership to an actual and ideological Br-Islamic identity by many third generation Bangladeshi females from Tower Hamlets enables them to construct a positive minority Muslim identity in East London. A female Muslim identity through the symbolism of the hijab has become a public expression of personal identity.

Many young Bangladeshi women are also engaged in a modern and positive interpretation of Islam which enables them to further their gender interests and also challenge traditional Bangladeshi patriarchal norms. Although gender equality remains an uncompleted and complex project for many such as Sanjida, I argue that Br-Islam is steadily allowing many young women to counter the traditional Bangladeshi image of women as child bearers and home makers and also claim public spaces as gender neutral zones. As Zeyba argues:

“My mum always walks behind my dad whenever they go out in public. I hate that about Bangladeshi culture. It’s as if us women are inferior to men. Me and my sisters are always telling my mum off for doing it. Islam teaches us that we are equal to men. My mum should learn to stand up for herself more like my sisters do with their husbands”

Br-Islam also allows many to feel part of a local and global community of sisterhood and has countered the identity conundrum of not fully belonging to either a Bangladeshi ethnic or a British national community. For those women who choose to cover themselves in a headscarf, jilbab (long dress) or a face veil, the act of ‘veiling’, I argue takes on a dual role: not only has the veil become a symbol of “*resistance*” and “*rejection*” of the West (Ahmed, 1992: 235) but it also enables many women to resist and reject traditional patriarchal Bangladeshi cultural practices and parental regimes (Gupta, 2009; Shain, 2003; El Guindi, 2000). Many have, as a result, become visible in public spaces dominated by men (Mule and Barthel, 1992; Watson, 1994) and vocal and confident (Shain, 2003) members of British society – far removed from the orientalist imagery of passivity and docility.

10.4 Conclusion

In summary, the visible female Muslim identity in particular the ‘veil’, far from being a symbol of male patriarchy, has become instead a symbol of choice, sisterhood, visibility and power for the three female participants of this study. I argue that despite some internal conflict, especially for Sanjida, between the traditional “*good Bangladeshi girl*” and the modern girl who likes to speak her “*mind*”, the three female participants of this study are part of a post-structuralist generation that allows them to define feminism for themselves by incorporating their own identities into the belief system. It is a form of progressive feminism that accommodates diversity and change in modern society (Tong, 2009) and recognises that far from being passive and docile, an Islamic identity for many younger generation of

Muslim girls, empowers them to contest, resist and speak out against oppressive structures (Shain, 2003; Haw, 1998).

The visible female Muslim identity, therefore, is both a resistance to internal community patriarchal authority, a movement away from tradition to modernity, a resistance to wider societal patriarchal norms (Bunting, 2004) and a political statement against wider systemic issues of marginalisation and 'otherization', the racist imagery associated with Muslim and South Asian women (Shain, 2003; Haw, 1998: 94) and Islamophobia. This visible identity also provides a sense of belonging and acceptance. Crucially, this modern Br-Islamic identity allows them to be confident in their multiple identities of Muslim, British, Bangladeshi and female in public spaces.

Part Four

Conclusions

Chapter 11

Conclusion: Br-Islam - *a way forward* ?

11.0 Important Disclaimer

Before I summarise below the key findings from this study, it is important to outline some important information that will aid the reader in making sense of what they have read thus far.

Firstly, it is noted by the author of this thesis that there were many generalisations made throughout this study. I am aware that I engaged in what Werbner (1994) calls the process of ‘fabulation’ in certain parts of the study – that is the process of generalisation and essentialism of cultures, nations, genders and ethnic groups. For example, it is a reductive view of the West to suggest that all it wants to do is to attack Islam. Equally, it is reductive and wrong to suggest that all women who wear the hijab are oppressed just as much as it is to say that Western women who wear bikinis are morally loose. I am aware that there are much socio-cultural complexities involved. I, nonetheless, used such fabulations to enhance argument and to provide context.

Secondly, this study is not a theological analysis of Islam. It is more a socio-cultural and ethnographic examination of the evolving identities of six third generation Bangladeshis from Tower Hamlets. I neither have the knowledge nor the expertise to make theological analysis of the many themes that have emerged from this research and leave this for Islamic scholars and theologians to debate.

Thirdly, I am aware that the feelings of rejection, displacement, non-belonging, intergenerational conflict and alienation from mainstream society are not simply limited to the experiences of many third generation Bangladeshis from East London. Many other immigrant communities including white indigenous communities (Mills, 2001; Dench et al, 2006) also experience similar issues. I have used the case study of the Bangladeshi community from East London to illustrate the complex identities of minority communities living in a majority situation.

Finally, I am not suggesting that the experiences of the six respondents of the main study and three from the pilot study of this thesis represent the experiences of **all** third generation Bangladeshis in Britain. I am aware that there is much diversity and complexity involved. I have highlighted this limitation in the methodology chapter of this study. I stress that I do not generalise from my small sample of interviewees to all third generation Bangladeshis from Tower Hamlets, although many of the voices and opinions expressed by the participants of this study echo the views of a large proportion of young Bangladeshis that I have encountered in recent years in my capacity as a researcher, youth worker, academic, journalist and community member.

The benefits of having such a small sample size is that it has allowed me to gain a deeper insight into the lives, experiences and aspirations of the third generation Bangladeshi community from East London. The main aim was to listen to the voices of some young Bangladeshis about their lives and growing up in Tower Hamlets and to understand these issues from 'their' point of view. Another aim was to research an under-researched group and try and understand some of the identity complexities involving a British born immigrant generation.

11.1 General Conclusion

The main aim of this thesis was to examine the many socio-political components which helps construct the identities of third generation Bangladeshis from East London. By adopting a phenomenological ethnographic approach to research, this study has discussed and debated the role of language, race, religion, nation and gender on the identities of six third generation Bangladeshis from Tower Hamlets. These were the elements of identity that I wished to explore as highlighted by the research questions posed at the beginning of this study. Within these broader aspects of personal and social identities, we have also examined complex sub-themes arising from the interviews and focusing on notions of 'home', 'racism', 'community', 'multiculturalism' and 'Britishness' through self narratives from the six participants themselves. It has also been a study of self exploration as I have been affected personally by many of the complex issues discussed throughout this thesis. As such, it was difficult sometimes to entangle myself away from the research process itself.

The main conclusion of this study is that the religion of Islam, in its many guises provides a sense of belonging and acceptance to many third generation Bangladeshis against years of systemic and institutional isolation, racism and poverty. Islam also provides a safety net against a Bangladeshi culture and 'way of life' which is increasingly becoming alien and irrelevant to the everyday lives of many British born third generation Bangladeshis from East London. Parekh (2006: 181) argues that their country of parental origin has no emotional or even cultural meaning for them, and its place has been taken by religion. The key question for many British Muslims has shifted from being a struggle for racial and ethnic equality (first and second generation) to that of a search for religious identity for the third generation.

Many third generation Bangladeshis have reclaimed their religious identity and rediscovered and redefined Islam as a modern and progressive form of 'Br-Islam'. Br-Islam, therefore, can be considered as a publicly expressed *new* identity and ethnicity (Bhabha, 1994: 66-84; Hannerz, 1992: 261; Alexander, 2005). This religiously based identity has been accelerated by their ability to read and speak English which allows them to research in the dominant language via text books, conferences and the internet. Coming also from a Muslim majority (Bangladesh) to a Muslim minority situation (Britain) (Lewis, 2007: 5-6), the ability to speak English has also provided the third generation Bangladeshis with what Hoffman (1991) refers to as "*linguistic competence*" which is key for migrants to translate "*anger into argument*". This "*Islamic awakening*" (Lewis, 2007: 112) has enabled many to reconfirm and redefine their ethno-religious roots, often making distinctions between them. As a result, many have constructed an 'idealised' form of Islam based on theology and ancient tales as opposed to lived religion often fused with ethnic customs and traditions (Bagguley & Hussain, 2005: 218). It is this 'ideal' which has mobilised many and has increased in importance as many younger generations of Muslims yearn for a more globalised Islamic identity (Samad, 1992).

Br-Islam is a neutral space where their multiple identities of being British born Bangladeshi Muslims can be negotiated. It is a space which helps manage the complexity of identities of being British (born), Bangladeshi (ethno-racial) and Muslim (religious). Furthermore, it is a space where they can engage in a process of syncretism and discernment (Yusuf quoted in Lewis, 2007: 36-39) – choosing and picking different elements and taking the best out of the multiplicity of cultures that they are a part of. I argue that Br-Islam is also not in conflict with what it means to be 'British'. Whilst Britishness remains an exclusive and contentious concept for many, the 'idea' of being British for the participants of this study has not weakened and their ties and commitment to Britain remains strong mainly on the basis of

birthright. Br-Islam also mirrors a British Western capitalist lifestyle with its emphasis on banking, socialising, education, business, fashion, career professionalism, women's rights and democracy (Kamrava, 2006; Malik, 2004). This Br-Islamic identity, however, has not emerged without struggle and pain. It has developed through contest and protest externally within the mainstream political arena and also internally through the shake up of Bangladeshi traditions, values and rituals⁷².

Furthermore, the diversity of groups, the mobility of global populations, the juxtapositions of different cultures, race, religions, gender and ethnicities in the modern world has led to groups searching for equal status and recognition of their identity. This yearning for public recognition goes hand in hand with a demand for resources and representation within the decision-making circles. The emergence of this new Br-Islamic culture, I argue, should be viewed within this politics of "*recognition*" (Taylor, 1992; Mandair, 2005: 23) as it is an "*equality seeking movement*" (Modood, 2005: x). In the case of the radicalised minority, Br-Islam not only represents an "*equality seeking movement*" but in fact puts them on superior moral standing to non-Muslims (Husain, 2007: 129-153).

The attraction of Br-Islam is not a literal one in most instances although there is a recognition that there are many third generation Bangladeshis who maintain a more religious orientated spiritual identity (Vertovec, 1998: 101) which revolves around prayer, piety, family, 'purdah' and charity. The popularity of Br-Islam does not necessarily imply a strict adherence to Islam's everyday practices, norms and rituals (Siddiqui, 2004: 57). As Akhtar (2005: 169) notes, it is not spiritual or moral guidance that many are after. Rather what attracts them to a

⁷² Refer to [Appendix 8](#) for a diagram which highlights the complex development of a multifaceted Br-Islamic identity amongst many third generation Bangladeshis

politicised Br-Islam is the “*idea*” of resisting the dominant negative hegemony. Akhtar (2005: 169) argues that actual and ideological membership to Islam provides the:

“vehicle for political mobilisation in relation to economic exclusion, and group solidarity in connection with social exclusion. In neither case does the turn to religion have to be accompanied by an acceptance of actual religious practice”

Therefore, whilst some of the third generation Bangladeshis of this study may not be fully fledged members of a modern and vibrant Br-Islam (mainly due to poverty) or indeed be actual everyday practicing Muslims themselves, it is the ‘idea’ of Islam as a global socio-political identity of ‘resistance’ which is the main attraction for them. As well as equipping the participants of this study to engage intellectually with the complex notion of the ‘British Muslim’, Br-Islam is also a dual resistance of a hostile, culturally racist and Islamophobic wider British society and also of a culturally stagnant and somewhat irrelevant Bangladeshi culture. Therefore, for many, their multifaceted Br-Islamic identity continues to remain not only the way that they identify themselves, but also the way that they want others to identify them.

Finally, the dynamic and modern Br-Islamic culture is an identity which is still in its early stages and is being managed, shaped and contested by its participants. There are many more socio-economic obstacles that need to be overcome before this Br-Islamic generation can be viewed as a visible and equal social partner within mainstream society. For example, the difficult task of social visibility and recognition for the British Bangladeshi community becomes clear when you consider that the vast majority remain one of the most impoverished social groups in the country, are still underachieving in education leading onto low job prospects and low income, live in overcrowded and poor housing conditions combined with a

situation where there is a large youth demographic population and a general climate of Islamophobia.

Below, I outline a ‘way forward’ for British Bangladeshis which will aid them in their journey from the periphery to the centre of public and political discourse (Giddens, 1984; Malik, 2004) and also in their ongoing struggle for “*recognition*”, voice, equality, belonging, power and visibility.

11.2 A way forward

Through the years of experience as a youth and community worker, academic researcher and journalist involved and interested in issues of identity, community and religion, I humbly outline below (table 4) a six point social programme as a possible way forward out of a cycle of poverty or what Ansari (2005: 391) has referred to as “*ghettoisation*”, for the British Bangladeshi community:

Table 4: A six point social programme for the British Bangladeshi community

1. The central component of the way forward for the Bangladeshi community of Tower Hamlets revolves around the theme of education. Whilst there have been major advancements in educational attainment since 2000, British Bangladeshis are still relatively underperforming in comparison to the general population. For example, 40% of Bangladeshi boys and 49% of Bangladeshi girls were leaving school with no qualifications in 2006 (Babb et al, 2006: 7, 41-43). Advancing the thoughts of Rahman (2007) and Chandia (2007, quoted in Lewis, 2007: 89-92), I argue that education is the key out of a cycle of poverty for the third generation Bangladeshis from Tower Hamlets;

2. Young Bangladeshis need to become more involved with local civic volunteering projects in order to become engaged and responsible community citizens. They need to take ownership of community issues and show signs of community leadership;

3. Young Bangladeshis need to continue engaging in the process of syncretism and discernment whereby they do not totally abandon their history, language, culture and heritage but rather take the best out of all the multiplicity of cultures that they are a part of, otherwise, an identity crisis is likely (Yusuf quoted in Lewis, 2007: 36-39);

4. The British Bangladeshi community needs to mature politically as a community and engage themselves democratically in wider issues of importance such as gender equality, foreign policy, freedom of speech, voting and much more. As such, there needs to be much more constructive internal self-criticism;

5. There needs to be more accessible public role models in decision making circles for Bangladeshi youth. These role models need to be both aspirational and inspirational;

6. A removal of a Manichaeian mind set ('them' vs 'us') is also necessary for Bangladeshi advancement in British society. British born Bangladeshis need to continue viewing themselves as part of the plural British 'us'.

All of the points above, I argue, will develop when point number one (educational advancement) occurs. Therefore, the issue of educational underachievement is the most pressing concern for policy makers, community leaders and parents of third generation Bangladeshis. I argue that possessing certain recognizable skills such as educational qualifications will firstly provide young Bangladeshis with more social prestige and secondly,

it will also provide many with the ability to bargain and engage in upward social mobility or what many historical sociologists have referred to as the process of ‘embourgeoisement’ (Kerr et al, 1962; Bernard, 1957).

Bourdieu (1971; 1974) argues that education can also provide you with the ‘cultural’ and ‘social’ capital to succeed in life as educational attainment can be translated into wealth, knowledge and power. However, Bourdieu (1971; 1974) reminds us of the exclusive and ‘cultural reproduction’ nature of education as children from privileged backgrounds are more likely to prosper in the educational system as they already have the prior skills and knowledge to succeed from their pre-school years. This introduces a dilemma: whilst education is presented as a ‘way out’ of poverty, it is also the structural, cultural and practical constraints of poverty which excludes many young Bangladeshis from succeeding in the education system in the first instance.

11.3 Implications for community, education and policy

My hope is that many Bangladeshi (my community) and people of ethnic minority origin read this thesis. For the elderly generation and community leaders in general who have a disconnect with the youth, not only will this thesis give them an understanding, a snapshot, of the difficult and painful experiences of growing up as a minority in a majority situation through the personal stories of the six participants of this study, but it will also give them an insight into the many conflicting and complex sets of identities that young people of British born Bangladeshi Muslim origin are living through. It is hoped that the many issues raised in this thesis (notion of ‘community’ and ‘home’, ‘Britishness’, the ‘other’, the modernisation of Islam, role of race and racism, foreign policy, Islamophobia, gender inequality, intergenerational linguistic and cultural gap, amongst others) will form the nexus of

forthcoming constructive discussions and debates between parent and child, grandparent and grandchild, teacher and student, friends, between youth worker and young person and so on. It is important to remember that these issues are live and evolving. Therefore, there is an opportunity for the Bangladeshi community of East London to determine the shape of these important socio-political concepts.

For teachers, educationalists and other professionals working with young people such as youth and social workers especially in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets and other inner city centres across Britain, this study argues for the incorporation of alternative histories, viewpoints and identities of their students, clients and young people into the school curriculum, youth workshop or training sessions. In reading this thesis, it is hoped that such professionals get an insight into the important role that religion, social environment and home culture plays in the construction of identity within many third generation Bangladeshis from East London. It is important to note that young Bangladeshis are working through conflicting, complex and competing sets of identities.

This study argues that there is a close and complex relationship between language (especially mother tongue), culture and identity (refer to chapter six; also refer to the collection of personal stories and poems written by writers, poets and educators in Cummins and Skutnabb-Kangas, 1988: 161-185). Many of the participants of this study, Akbar, Saeed and especially Sanjida understood the importance of the mother tongue for the maintenance of history, identity and heritage. As Saeed argues, "*Bengali is our mother tongue... we are Bengali and we must be able to speak our own language*". Along with Bengali, this study highlights the growing importance of Arabic as a modern language for many young Bangladeshis in Tower Hamlets. I argue that both Bengali and Arabic are more than just

home or community languages or languages just used to communicate with each other. Along with its socio-cultural and political significance, these languages go hand in hand with a whole new cultural lifestyle – Br-Islam.

One of the conclusions and aims of this study is for teachers, educators and policy makers to become more aware of the socio-political climate in which young people in inner city urban areas such as Tower Hamlets are growing up in. I argue that young people do not live in a vacuum and that there should not be a distinction between wider society and the educational world – they are part of interconnected social worlds. There is considerable overlap and young people do not leave their culture behind once they enter the school gates. Despite some obvious practical limitations in offering a multicultural curriculum such as catering for classes which may contain both bilinguals and monolinguals especially in richly diverse multicultural cities such as London, I argue that a more inclusive multicultural curriculum has many educational advantages. Understanding ‘their’ social world and incorporating it within the school curriculum has many benefits to bilingual and bicultural pupils such as:

- positive cognitive development;
- exposing children to diverse languages and cultures;
- preparing children for a modern multicultural and multiracial society;
- expression of cultural identities;
- preparing young people to compete economically in a more global society;
- children are better integrated, happier and consequently perform better academically if value and importance are attached to their language and culture.

This includes not only valuing their culture and languages (Bengali, Arabic) within the school curriculum, but also constructively tackling local area issues identified in this study (such as identity, local area history of immigration, race and racism, Islamophobia, Britishness, issues of social and material deprivation, intergenerational conflict, foreign policy etc) within the

curriculum and teaching pedagogy. A more radical suggestion pushes the need for British history to be rewritten in order to make it more inclusive of ethnic minorities and celebrate their important contribution to development of the British national story (Philips, 2007). Essentially, developing what Miller (1983: xi) describes as a “*curriculum for all children*” in which language diversity remains central - a “*multicultural curriculum*” for a multicultural society.

There is plenty of research which examines the ways in which teachers and educators can act as the mediator between language, community, culture and the school (refer to series of essays edited by Gregory, 1997). Much of this research focuses on young children, especially learners of nursery and primary schooling age (3-11) (although there are examples of research on pupils of secondary schooling age – refer to series of essays edited by Travers & Klein, 2004), and pushes forward the importance of teachers to develop culturally responsive teaching programmes based on an awareness of the knowledge children bring from home and the community (refer to series of essays edited by Gregory, 1997; Miller, 1983; Went, 2004; Nieto, 1999; Kenner, 2004). As Conteh argues (2003: 24), “*the most effective teaching and learning happens when teachers and learners share values and views about how it should be done, when teachers can see things through their learners’ eyes and understand their viewpoints*”. Although the focus of this study is more on young people who are of secondary and college schooling age whose learning patterns and cognitive development differ from younger learners, I argue that the participants of this study are also members of differing, complex and competing bilingual and bicultural identities. Therefore, much of the arguments discussed here also apply to older learners of teenage years. It is also argued that it is because of what Cummins and Skutnabb-Kangas (1988: 5) refer to as ‘educational violence’ (the “*shame*” of being a “*minority*” within education), that many of the participants of this study

such as Azad and Zeyba have developed negative attitudes towards their Bangladeshi culture and language.

The socio-cultural model of learning pioneered by Vygotsky (1978, 1986) and developed further by educators such as Nieto (1999) suggests that learning is socially situated within educational environments and develops from and within the relationships between teachers/learners and learners/learners. With this model in mind, it is argued that along with developing a culturally responsive teaching programme, bilingualism of learners should also be viewed as an asset by teachers. Again, there is a plethora of evidence which supports the argument that children who are bilingual, and confidently so, do well in school and in employment (Miller, 1983; Conteh, 2003; Cummins, 1996; Kenner, 2004). Like Cummins and Skutnabb-Kangas (1988), Conteh (2003) also argues that when the skills of bilingual and bicultural learners are recognised and valued in classroom pedagogy, they are able to successfully and confidently move between community, culture and school. The personal and social benefits of bilingualism far outweigh recent nationalistic and anti-immigration campaigns across Europe in favour of mono-lingualism (France, 2004; Netherlands, 2005). Learning through different languages provides not only cognitive benefits, but it also enhances multilingual identities and also provides a gateway into other cultural worlds (refer to series of essays edited by Kenner & Hickey, 2008).

Considering the importance of bilingual education in richly diverse ethno-lingual areas such as Tower Hamlets, I argue that schools need to give more serious consideration to skills and strategies that allow the space for culture and language to develop within their teaching pedagogy. I outline below two such strategies.

Firstly, **biliteracy**, as a concept allows young learners to write in different language scripts. It also allows bilingual pupils to live in two or more “*simultaneous [linguistic] worlds*” (as opposed to two separate worlds) (Kenner, 2004: 107). It is argued here that literacy in the first language helps the learner to develop literacy in a second (Gravelle, 1996; Kenner, 2000). In many instances, young children who speak more than one language syncretise their languages into a new language. Examples of more verbal biliteracies are found in the development of what I have termed ‘Bang-lish’ and Arab-*english*’ that I have discussed earlier in chapter six. Many of the young people of this study were creative with their spoken languages, and similar to the biliteracies developed in Kenner’s (2004) study of six year olds from London, many third generation Bangladeshis have created a new language drawing on structures from both English, Bengali and colloquial Arabic. As ‘talk’ is an essential part of learning as it supports cognitive development and enhances skills which underpin literacy (Wells & Chang-Wells, 1992), Bang-lish and Arab-*english* have become new ways of communicating with peers who share the same language and cultural background (refer to studies by Mor-Sommerfeld, 2002; Murshad, 2002).

Secondly, considering the importance and complexity of identity, culture and language to many of the participants of this study, I argue that schools in areas such as Tower Hamlets, should adopt a flexible bilingual approach to language teaching and learning. Champions of bilingual education such as García & Kleifgen (2010) and Creese & Blackledge (2010) push forward ‘**translanguaging**’ as a pedagogic teaching method for learners who speak more than one language. This approach strays away from a traditional rigid monolingual instructional method to teaching and advocates teaching bilingual children by means of bilingual instructional strategies, in which two or more languages are used alongside each other. In some instances, it may be that a learner reads in one language and speaks and writes

in another. In developing this argument, Creese & Blackledge (2010) argue that there is an interdependence of skills and knowledge across languages and that community and mainstream languages can actually complement each other.

Such strategies not only positively value the history, culture, heritage, community and language of bilingual learners within the school curriculum and teaching pedagogy but also ‘empower’ many learners. Cummins and Skutnabb-Kangas (1988) push this notion further by arguing that the right to speak and maintain the mother tongue language is not only a “*human right*” but also “*empowers*” learners to challenge existing power relations in wider society. Along with challenging the status quo, the empowering process also results in the emergence of the critical consciousness (what Freire (1985) refers to as ‘conscientization’) within many bilingual learners. This allows them to analyse what has been done to them (alienation, discrimination, exclusion, social and political marginality) and thus begin the struggle for identity, self-respect, self-determination and representation. I argue that unless wider systemic issues of power, representation and marginality are challenged, school structures will continue representing the imbalance of power in wider society and bilingual minorities will continue to experience academic difficulties.

Furthermore, discussing issues of cultural, social and religious identities with fellow peers in an educational setting will not only motivate and build self esteem within young people and encourage a greater understanding of each others “*map[s] of meaning*” (Hall, 1990: 222), but it will also encourage personal and academic achievement.

For policy makers, the message is to work closer with minority communities such as the East London Bangladeshis and understand the many historical and contemporary structural and

institutional constraints revolving around issues of poverty, discrimination, inequality and marginalisation which have contributed to their complex identities. There should also be a recognition that in the modern globalised world enhanced by technology and communications (Baylis & Smith, 2001), local feelings of resentment and injustice are also determined by global actions, especially foreign policy involving interventions or wars against Muslim countries. Finally, the public expression of Br-Islam should be viewed as a positive development as it enables its members to negotiate and manage their multifaceted identities. With its emphasis on democratic values and a Western cultural lifestyle, the dynamic and modern Br-Islam should not sit outside a national British identity but be viewed positively as a “*different kind of British*” (Ward, 2004: 138).

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Glossary of foreign words, key concepts and terms

Aaki: Arabic term meaning ‘Brother’

Abba: father

Amma: mother

Bangladeshis: people who originate from the country of Bangladesh. It is acknowledged that there is much diversity in terms of language, class and caste in Bangladesh and a pivotal divide between urban and rural culture. However, as the majority (95%) of British Bangladeshis originate from the Sylheti region of Bangladesh and all of the participants of this study are Sylheti, whenever there is reference to ‘Bangladeshi culture’ in this study, it is in reference to a particular Sylheti rural Bangladeshi culture

Bear: modern urban language meaning “a lot of”

Bengali: has a dual meaning – the language spoken by Bangladeshis and also a term used to describe the national cultural identity of Bangladeshis. The terms *Bengali*, *Bangla*, *Bangladeshi* are used interchangeably throughout this study

Bidesh: foreign country. Term mainly used by the first generation of settlers as a reference to Britain

Blaze: smoking marijuana

Br-Islam: a fusion of Bangladeshi cultural norms, Islamic spirituality and ideology alongside a practical western lifestyle

Bro: East London slang connoting a term of endearment for a friend or a brother

Burka: Long and loose piece of outer garment covering the whole body. Includes also the head covering and the face veil. Worn by many Muslim women across the globe.

It is noted that although there are stylistic, geographical and cultural distinctions between the *burka* and the *jilbab*, these terms are used interchangeably throughout this study as often there is much confusion. Both types of clothing are outer garments which are loose and denote a wider reference to the important Islamic concepts of modesty and privacy

Cotching: modern urban language meaning “socialising, relaxing”

Dada: grandfather

Daadi: grandmother

Desh: a reference to Bangladesh as ‘home’

Don't watch: modern urban language meaning “see you later”

East London: a reference to the East End of London. East London and Tower Hamlets are used interchangeably throughout this study

Eid: there are two Eid celebrations per year that Muslims engage in. The first *Eid al-fitr* is celebrated at the end of the fasting month (Ramadan) and the second, *Eid al-adha* is known as the festival of sacrifice where there is a ritual slaughter of sheep, goats and camels which is then mainly distributed to the poor

First generation: Bangladeshi migrants who immigrated to Britain predominantly in the 1950s & 1960s

Hadith: the stories and actions of the Prophet Muhammed (PBUH) and his companions

Halal: permissible Islamically

Hijab: has a trilogy of meanings: 1. to conceal, hide, cover and to veil, 2. Lowering of the gaze with the opposite sex and applies to men as well who must lower their gaze in the presence of unrelated women, 3. In recent times, hijab has also become the common name given to the headscarf worn by Muslim women, pinned at the neck with their faces showing. According to Islamic scholarship, *hijab* is given the wider meaning of modesty, privacy and morality

Inshallah: God willing

Izzat: family honour especially within the community

Jazakallah: Thank you

Jilbab: refers to a long, flowing, baggy overgarment worn by some Muslim women. In some parts of the world such as Indonesia, the jilbab refers to the headscarf. Sometimes also referred to as the *burka* (see above)

Kyaf a hall: Arabic for ‘How are you’

Lungi: a sarong like dress. A national dress of Bangladesh

Madrassah: Islamic education centre, usually a boarding school

Maxi: a long dress worn by many Bangladeshi women as home wear

Maya: love

Minor: modern urban language meaning “don't worry”

Niqaab: a face veil

Purdah: protecting Muslim women from contact with men outside of their immediate family

Qu'ran: Holy religious book for Muslims

Sahabiyat: full citizenship

Salaam a laikum: Muslim greeting which translates as 'peace be upon you'

Saree: a long draping dress worn mainly by the first and second generation of Bangladeshi women

Second generation: children of first generation settlers, most of whom were born in Bangladesh and then came over as young children to Britain in the late 1970s and early 1980s when family reunification took place

Shariah: Islamic law

Shisha: smoking flavoured tobacco

Shutki: dried fish. A popular dish in many Bangladeshi households

Sylheti: the part of Bangladesh where most British Bangladeshis originate from and also a reference to the language spoken by Sylheti's

Third generation: British born children of the second generation Bangladeshis

Ukthi: sister

Ummah: one global Muslim community (brother and sisterhood)

Walahi: Arabic term meaning 'I swear (in god's name)'

9/11: a reference to the September the 11th 2001 terrorist attacks in New York

7/7: a reference to the 7th July 2005 terrorist attacks in London

Appendix 2: Introduction/ Information letter given to the participants of the study

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PhD Candidate in Education
Department of Education, University of London, Goldsmiths College
New Cross, London SE14 6NW
T: 07939 932 650, E: edp01ah@gold.ac.uk

18th March 2006

Dear Parent/ Guardian/ Participant

Re: PhD Field Research; Unstructured Interviews

My name is Aminul Hoque and I am currently in the second year of a three year PhD scholarship programme with the Department of Education, Goldsmiths College. The title of my PhD is *The Development of a Br-Islamic Identity: Third Generation Bangladeshis from East London (Tower Hamlets)*. The main focus of my research is to examine the many layers of identities within third generation Bangladeshis from East London (born after 1985).

My interest in this field of study has partly stemmed from a personal viewpoint (the fact that I am a Bangladeshi myself) and also driven by academic concepts of ethnicity, religion, national identity, 'Britishness' and the concept of the homeland. Where do the third generation Bangladeshis see themselves within these debates ?

Your son/ daughter has voluntarily agreed to take part in some detailed unstructured interviews. Essentially, I am hoping to hear about 'their' life stories and 'their' life experiences and I want to view the above concepts from 'their' worldview. Although the interviews will be unstructured, nonetheless they will cover the following broad themes:

- A bit about themselves (likes, dislikes, hobbies) – *to establish rapport*
- Childhood memories
- Area of residence
- Family life
- Schooling
- Social life/ peer groups
- Culture and community
- The 'who am I' identity question - (focusing on issues of race, gender, ethnicity, language, nationality, religion and other areas important to them)
- Birthplace and homeland

- Future aspirations
- Other themes identified by the participant

It is anticipated that the length of the interviews will be anything between 1-2 hours and a follow up interview may be conducted at a later date where some of the themes may be explored in greater depth. All the interviews will be recorded and the data will solely be used for research purposes and also for the PhD writing up process. Prior permission will be sought beforehand if the gathered material is to be used for any other purposes. Your cooperation will be sought in all matters. Rest assured, interviews will be conducted at a time and venue convenient to your child and **all** health and safety and child protection guidelines will be adhered to. My CRB check is available for your inspection.

Finally, it is important that your child is a willing voluntary participant in this research project. All in all, six third generation Bangladeshis will be interviewed and the data will be analysed as part of the PhD writing up process.

Please feel free to contact me if you require further information regarding the above. Alternatively, please feel free to contact my supervisor at Goldsmiths College who will be more than happy to answer any further queries that you may have. His details are as follows:

Dr Chris Kearney
Department of Education, Goldsmiths College
T: 020 7919 7343
E: aea01ck@gold.ac.uk

Thanking you for your cooperation.

Faithfully

Aminul Hoque
PhD Candidate in Education, Goldsmiths College

Appendix 3: Consent letter for parents/ guardians of participants who were 16 and under

Aminul Hoque
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Letter of Consent

I give my consent for to take part in the field research/ interviewing stage of the PhD study entitled *The Development of a Br-Islamic Identity: Third Generation Bangladeshis from East London (Tower Hamlets)* as conducted by Mr Aminul Hoque. I have spoken to and he/she understands the nature, aim and objective of the research. I understand that many of the questions will be of a personal nature probing areas of family, schooling and social life amongst others. I also understand that any agreement to take part in the interviewing stage of the PhD research is wholly voluntary and that can withdraw at any time as a participant without prejudice and without any prior warning. It must be reiterated that I give consent and permission for any and all interview material (which will be recorded) to be used for the purposes of the PhD write-up process and for the purposes of illustration, presentation and any other PhD related activity. Whilst the writer has ultimate say in terms of interpretation, content and choice of interview passage, both and I must agree to **direct** quotes being used in order to counter areas of misrepresentation. Finally, I understand that the interviewing will be time consuming and may involve a repeat interview at a later stage. I agree to co-operate in such circumstances.

I will contact Aminul Hoque on the above details if I need further information regarding the PhD research project.

Signed..... (Parent/ Guardian)
Name..... (Print) Date

Signed..... (Participant)
Name..... (Print) Date.....

Address.....
.....
.....

Contact Tel no..... Contact Email Address.....

Gender..... DOB.....

Appendix 4: Colour Coding the data from the interviews into themes and sub-themes

Five main components of identity examined in the study (colour coded):

1. Language

2. Race

3. Religion

4. Nationality

5. Gender (Bangladeshi female)

Sub-themes within the components of identity that emerged throughout the data analysis:

LANGUAGE (L)

Abbreviated Code	Sub-theme
L – BLPC	Bengali as a language of practical communication
L – ECL	English as a commercial language important for progress and modernity
L – BLCI	Bengali as a language of history, heritage, culture and identity
L – CA	Emergence of new colloquial Arabic in everyday language

RACE (R)

Abbreviated Code	Sub-theme
R – CR	Experience of early childhood racism
R – WM	A stereotypical view of the ‘white man’
R – RS	A racially segregated East London leading to lack of interaction with other communities
R – SC	Skin colour marks them out as ‘different’. Skin colour presented as a barrier to societal participation
R – OTH	Bengali and Islamic culture presented as the ‘other’

RELIGION (RL)

Abbreviated Code	Sub-theme
RL – ISS	Islam as a social and spiritual force
RL – IPI	Islam as a political identity leading to victim mentality
RL – ICI	Islam as a cultural identity
RL – IHI	Islam as a hyphenated-identity
RL – II	Islam as a ‘core’ identity
RL – UvsT	Muslim ‘us’ vs non-Muslim ‘them’ polarisation of society
RL – ID	Islamic identity through dress
RL – IGL	Islam as a global identity
RL – BrI	Islam as a modern, trendy and Westernised identity (Br-Islam)
RL – IBC	Islam becoming more important than Bangladeshi culture
RL – NR	Experience of new racisms (Islamophobia)

NATIONALITY (N)

Abbreviated Code	Sub-theme
N – BB	‘British’ by virtue of birthright
N – LB	Legal right to be ‘British’
N – BBI	A multifaceted ‘British/ Bangladeshi’ identity
N – BrC	A fluid and contested ‘Britishness’
N – GENB	A generalisation of ‘Britishness’
N – EW	Englishness as associated with ‘whiteness’
N – CH	A fuzzy and complex notion of ‘home’: Britain is home but also sense of displacement due to ‘different’ culture and skin colour. Bangladesh is “ <i>hot</i> ”, full of “ <i>mosquitoes</i> ”. No fixed sense of ‘home’
N – HBR	‘Home’ as equated with family, familiarity and place of birth
N – CCBEL	Sense of ‘community’ and ‘connection’ with fellow Bangladeshis in East London
N – DBC	Disconnect from Bangladeshi culture and Bangladesh as a country. Bangladesh viewed as a place of “ <i>holiday</i> ” and Bangladeshis viewing the respondents as “ <i>tourists</i> ”
N – HCM	‘Home’ having a close relationship with childhood memories
N – BM	Deep connection with Bangladesh (the “ <i>motherland</i> ”)

GENDER (BANGLADESHI FEMALE) (GBF)

Abbreviated Code	Sub-theme
GBF – GBG	Notion of the “ <i>good Bangladeshi girl</i> ” (somebody who is quiet, religious, domesticated, studious, respects her parents and is concerned about family name and reputation) still wielding importance
GBF – CGBG	Challenging and resisting the notion of the “ <i>good Bangladeshi girl</i> ”
GBF – I+	Impact of Islam as a force for change
GBF – MMH	Multiple meanings of ‘hijab’/ covering
GBF – HP	Hijab as a symbol of politicisation
GBF – HS	Hijab as a symbol of spirituality
GBF – HB	Hijab as a symbol of trendiness/ modernity/ fashion – “ <i>hijabi Barbie</i> ”
GBF – EC	The importance of education and career

A note about CAQDAS:

Whilst I was aware of the availability and many benefits (such as the ability to rapidly process large volumes of data and also less time consuming) of certain computer assisted software programmes in analysing and coding qualitative data (CAQDAS) such as ETHNOGRAPH and Nvivo, I did not use CAQDAS during the data analysis stage of this study due to the following three reasons:

- I felt that the laborious task of manually transcribing and replaying the recordings of the interviews was in itself a crucial part of the overall research process. It enabled me to capture the complexity of identity and also examine the many sub-themes and re-occurring patterns that connected the six respondents;
- CAQDAS would have been useful if I was analysing large quantities of data. However, I was only analysing six main and six follow up interviews. Therefore, due to the relatively small number of interviews, it was more useful for me to manually colour and thematically code the interviews into categories;
- I wanted to ‘humanise’ the data analysis process. I wanted to capture the emotions, feelings, behaviours and attitudes of the participants and felt that the usage of computer software programmes would ‘dehumanise’ the respondents.

Appendix 5: Interview extract with Sanjida discussing her childhood memories. (17/07/2006 @ Nando's Restaurant, Bethnal Green @ 5pm)

In analysing the transcripts of the interviews, I have also randomly interjected my own observations and thoughts. There were many benefits to this:

- It assisted me to understand the various components of their identities;
- It helped locate their voices/ stories within wider theory and literature;
- It was useful for data analysis afterwards;
- It helped me capture the mood and atmosphere of the individual interviews.

Bold Square brackets [] indicate these interjections throughout the transcripts.

[07: 50] Me: *“tell me about your early childhood years in Tower Hamlets”*

[07:55] Sanjida: [pause] *“err what, you mean about where I grew up ?”*

[08:00] Me: *“you can talk to me about anything. I am very interested to find out more about your childhood years, what your happy and sad memories are, who your friends were, what hobbies did you have, basically, anything you feel comfortable in talking about growing up in Tower Hamlets”*

[08: 15] Sanjida: *“wow, there’s a lot to tell. Where do I start ?”*

[08:19] Me: *“let’s start from where you were born”*

[08:22] Sanjida: *“I was born in London Hospital and lived in Whitechapel for the first nine years of my life. I’ll never forget those times. Those were the happiest moments of my life (N –HCM). My family were living altogether, my neighbours were like my family and I had some amazing friends. Everyone that lived there, it was like [pause] everyone was like a family. Everyone used to look out for each other. Everyone knew everyone basically in the area (N –HBR & N –CCBEL). You wouldn’t be embarrassed to come out in your pyjamas or come out in silly clothes [laughter]. I used to love coming out in the summer and playing. All of us would come out, there was no conflict whatsoever, like, everyone was fine with everyone*

basically. [pause] *I think we had about three or four non-Bengalis living there and we were fine with them as well (R – RA). You were able to play out there without my mum having to watch us because there would be other people there. We used to climb over into each others gardens without even asking. Everyone would be alright with it. We used to stay over till late and sometimes have sleepovers. I used to love living there [pause] if I had a chance to go back and live there then I probably would take it (N – HCM)”*

[Sanjida recalls her early childhood years with a big smile, she has obvious happy memories of her time in Whitechapel. She recalls stories of her childhood with accurate information and with fondness. Her immediate childhood years are obviously an important part of her life and have played a key role in her identity formation. Action: maybe it will be a good idea to visit this area with Sanjida. Maybe, she can take me on a tour of the area. Maybe, she can get some of her childhood friends along as well ? Discuss this with Sanjida]

[09:24] Me: *“you describe a beautiful picture of your time in Whitechapel. Tell me more about your friends and also of any funny stories”*

[09:31] Sanjida: *“well [pause] there wasn’t many people my age [pause] there was me, my brother, my neighbour Selina, Tanya, Sanju and that lot. Everyone used to get along basically. I didn’t really think I had a best friend from that area”*

[09:44] Me: *“do you still keep in contact with these friends ?”*

[09: 47] Sanjida: *“umm, not really. I see them every now and then at weddings. I rarely go back to that area. It’s a shame as we were all very close. I’ll never forget that pavement that used to come into the road. There’s something about it, I don’t know. Like, if I was to go back there now and it wasn’t there then it would feel empty. And that red wall as well [pause] me, Tanya and Sanju used to climb up there and sit there. And I would never forget Tanya’s black and white cat (Cedric). I used to always be scared of that cat. At the time, he was the only cat around that area. When no 8 got a cat [pause] what was his name? Ginger or something, I was scared. I stopped going there. I was very scared of cats (N – HCM)”*

[10:29] [pause]

[10:31] *“oh yeah. This one time we made this house thing. You know when you come into the close there’s this shed like thing. People used to dump wooden things. One time, me and one of my friends Tanya, we like decided to make up a house and it was actually, it was quite good yeah. It had ceilings and a doorway and we actually took cushions in there and put all our dolls in there that we would be really protective over. It was like a house. We would take food in there and we would eat and then one time one of my cousins came and he broke it and we were really sort of angry at him. We had it up for nearly a week and a half [pause] I had so much freedom then.[11:04] We used to mainly do what the boys in the local area did – stay out late, play ‘on it’, climb walls and build things (GBF –CGBG). My parents were ok with me doing all that. I know how lucky I was as Sanju’s parents hardly let her out of the house. This ‘staying at home’ crap, unfortunately is something we Bengali girls have to live with. I don’t like it and don’t quite agree with it but understand why it happens (GBF – GBG)”*

[11:27] Me: *“why do you think it happens?”*

[11:30] [pause]

[11:32] Sanjida: *“why do I think it happens? Well its like its complicated but basically its all about family reputation and what other people might think. Us girls, unfortunately, have to be good girls so that our parents and family get a good name (GBF – GBG)”*

[Sanjida introduces the concept of the ‘good girl’ for the first time in her interview]

[11:41] Me: *“what do you mean by ‘good girls’?”*

[11:44] Sanjida: *“you know, Miss goody goody two shoes. Somebody who is quiet (GBF – GBG), religious (RL – ICI & RL – II), can cook, does well in her studies, looks after her brothers and sisters, stays at home and gets married to a man chosen by her parents (GBF – GBG)”*

[This is what Shain (2003) has referred to as a ‘cultural pathology’ of South Asian girls. Reinforcing the ‘orientalist’ (Said, 1979) image of women who are passive, docile, quiet

and dominated by the men in their lives. Shain argues that many younger South Asian girls are actively resisting such a cultural pathology]

[11:57] Me: “are you Miss goody goody two shoes?”

[12:00] Sanjida: “me [pause]? It’s complicated. I am and I am not. I try my best to be. I don’t know which way to go. One of my aunts has completely rebelled and gone off to live on her own. My other two aunts are Miss goody goody two shoes. All three are happy in their own way. I don’t know what route I wanna take **but making my parents happy and proud are important to me (GBF – GBG)”**

[12:22] Me: “if it is ok with you, we will re-visit the important theme of your future aspirations and pleasing your parents later on in our interview. In the meantime, tell me how you ended up leaving Whitechapel and now living in Bethnal Green ?”

[12:35] Sanjida: “well [pause] my family came into financial difficulties in 1999 and we had to sell our home. We moved to temporary council housing in Forest Gate. I didn’t like living in Forest Gate that much. **It didn’t feel like home (N –HBR).** It was just one long road, it was dry, there was no atmosphere. And then we moved to Bethnal Green in 2000. I like living in Bethnal Green. Everything is close to you. **In the whole building, there’s about 5 families who are Bengali and the rest are mostly white and Chinese (R – RA)”**

[13:03] Me: “How does it feel to live in an area where the majority are non-Bangladeshis”

[13:07] Sanjida: “it doesn’t really effect us but you know **when you like grow up with your own culture and with so many of your own and then you suddenly go to a different place, its kinda weird (R - RA)** but then you kinda fit into it” [13:19]

[Sanjida’s cosmopolitan upbringing is making her make a distinction between her Bangladeshi “own culture” and the cultures and lifestyle of others. Positioned against the durability of other cultures and communities, Sanjida is becoming ethnically and racially aware of herself as a Bangladeshi and is also taking ownership of her culture (Ericksen, 1993)]

Appendix 6: Timing of re-occurring themes and sub-themes within interviews – under the theme of ‘Language’

← Time(s) within Interview when sub-theme raised/ discussed by interviewee →

Name	Bengali as a language of practical communication (L – BLPC)	English as a commercial language important for progress and modernity (L - ECL)	Bengali as a language of history, heritage, culture and identity (L - BLCI)	Emergence of new colloquial Arabic in everyday language (L - CA)
Sanjida 1st Interview	83:25, 96:07		56:09, 83:33, 84:05, 85:13	00:01, 90:21, 94:49, 110:37
Sanjida 2nd Interview	24:37	25:21	23:29, 25:06	00:01, 23:00, 31:09
Azad 1st Interview	63:18, 65:28	68:19, 68:52, 69:39, 73:50		28:12, 41:47, 71:29
Azad 2nd Interview		24:00, 24:36, 26:08		18:31
Saeed 1st Interview	43:20		40:35, 42:34	08:28, 16:42, 33:06, 41:23, 63:00
Saeed 2nd Interview	09:22	19:58	19:24	02:41, 09:27, 19:32, 22:08, 22:18, 37:49
Akbar 1st Interview	56:07	58:10, 58:41, 59:36, 62:34	64:20, 65:58	00:01, 62:29
Akbar 2nd Interview		19:36	19:22	00:01, 24:27, 28:21
Taiba 1st Interview	52:04, 53:00, 62:05	53:01, 56:44, 59:23		00:01, 33:25, 64:13
Taiba 2nd Interview	01:24	15:03	14:36	00:01, 12:39, 19:58, 20:23, 32:01
Zeyba 1st Interview		32:36, 34:00, 34:19		00:01, 12:11, 16:29, 26:53, 38:43, 41:00
Zeyba		22:29, 23:01	23:41	00:01, 08:26,

2 nd Interview				19:54, 36:14
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Brief Analysis of Language ‘timing’ grid

- The usage of colloquial Arab is common amongst the six participants. Four (Sanjida, Akbar, Taiba, Zeyba) out of six of the respondents greeted and said farewell to me in Arabic;
- The second interviews enabled me to take back to the respondents areas of confusion and contradiction from the first interviews. For example, Akbar understood the role of Bengali as central for his own identity, yet did not see the relevance of his own future children learning Bengali;
- After colour coding the first interview transcripts, I was able to take a bird’s eye view of patterns and correlations. This enabled me to probe further in the second interview. For example, Azad maintained his stance in the second interview that the Bengali language held “*no relevance*” to him or his identity. Similarly, unlike all of the other respondents, Zeyba saw no “*practical*” relevance of Bengali as all members of her family spoke English fluently. It is interesting to note that Zeyba’s family were the most educated and affluent of all the six participants;
- Whether in their first or second interview, all of the respondents acknowledged the important role of English for their careers and to modernise;
- It was Sanjida who was most struggling with the idea that the Bengali language would “*die*” if she and her future children did not speak it;
- Zeyba and Saeed (more than the others) used colloquial Arabic slang during the interviews.

Appendix 7: Visual images of the Br-Islamification of Tower Hamlets

Praying in park before and during Sunday League football game



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Islamic fashion: shops and market stalls selling fashionable Islamic clothing, catwalk models wearing Islamic clothing, image of the 'trendy' and 'modern' "*hijaabi Barbie*", colourful, bright trendy headscarf fashion



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www.life.com/image/82503278



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New London Muslim Centre extension – is an indication of the growing importance of the role of religion in the lives of women and also of the growing power that women are gaining. The proposal is to have a building with “over 5000m2 of usable space, with 5 floors dedicated to providing prayer space and services for women”



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Segregated eating out, gym and mosque culture for women



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The windows of the doors 'blacked out' during Zeyba's 'women only' karate class in a local youth club, as a form of 'purdah' (separation) from men



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Islamic coffee culture



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Example of prayer facilities in the town hall



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A graffiti of a swastika on local mosque door – highlighting the existence still of ‘old’ racisms



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Islamic banking



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Islamic holidays

Snow, ski and salaam



The Burquini



www.islamictravels.com

Islamic stand-up comedians



www.gwhatchet.com

Appendix 8: Diagram showing the complex development of a multifaceted Br-Islamic identity amongst many third generation Bangladeshis

