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Motherhood as Constructed by *Us*: Muslim Women's Negotiations from a Space That Is Their Own

SARIYA CHERUVALLIL-CONTRACTOR*

Abstract

According to foundational Islamic texts, motherhood is a key aspect of women's diverse social roles; however some Muslim religious commentaries position motherhood as the *only* aspect of women's contributions to society. The everyday mothering experiences of Muslim women remain absent from these discussions. This anthropological article will examine Muslim women's narratives of motherhood and mothering in contemporary Britain. In my research, Muslim women in Britain chose motherhood, firstly, as one of the many fronts on which to challenge patriarchy that is evident in some Muslim texts and to thus 'reclaim their faith' as articulated in foundational Islamic texts. Secondly, in their mothering experiences, Muslim women found a space of commonality that they shared with other women – motherhood was something these Muslim women believed they shared with their 'sisters' who were from backgrounds different to their own. Within their diverse and multifaceted struggles, Muslim women thus identified a space which they share with other women.

Keywords

Motherhood; Islam; Muslim women; Feminism; Reclaiming Faith; Religion.

Author affiliation

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Introduction

This article examines young Muslim women's experiences and understandings of motherhood in contemporary Britain. As with women from any community, Muslim women's motherhood experiences in Britain are influenced by a variety of social 'stimuli' – their status as first, second or third generation migrants; their own socio-economic-political situations as well as that of wider society; their culture; the communities and family structures they live in; their education and their religious belief. This article focuses on the influence of religious belief on Muslim women's mothering experiences. In doing so it addresses a clear gap in academic literature wherein there is almost no critical engagement with the relationship between Islam and mothering, and the changing ways in which one is influenced and informed by the other. What limited scholarship exists is recent,¹ indicating that this is an emerging field of study that requires much further work.

Motherhood may be studied as an institution that is determined by social norms, cultural practices and religious structures. As mothering, it may also be understood as the everyday lived experiences of women who are mothers (O'Reilly 2004; Rich 1976). Motherhood has always been diverse, decentred and contested, yet writing in 1994, Glenn comments on how 'a particular definition of mothering has so dominated popular media representations, academic discourse, and political and legal doctrine that the existence of alternative beliefs and practices among racial, ethnic, and sexual minority communities as well as non-middle-class segments of society has gone unnoticed' (1994: 2–3). Fast forward to 2011, and Kawash writes that the genre of motherhood studies has grown to embrace the diversities of mothering experiences influenced by race, class and gender. Yet according to her, religion and 'the connections and crossings between secular and religiously framed mothering practices and experiences' remain under-researched (Kawash 2011: 994). In writing this article, it has become evident that the field has moved on, but while much has been written about Christian mothers, there is hardly any academic engagement with the mothering experiences of women who adhere to non-Christian faiths. It is in this context that this article makes a beginning. It presents a narrative that is grounded in the voices and words of Muslim women and aims to capture the complexities and nuances of their lived experiences as mothers, and also as daughters who have observed *their* mothers. This article also provides a critical examination of the theological discourses that underpin Muslim women's, and indeed Muslim societies', expectations of motherhood. In addressing both textual and lived understandings of Muslim motherhood, this article adds to the debates that Muslim women (and Muslim societies as a whole) are having about how religious texts are interpreted and implemented in everyday life.

Working with Muslim Women

As a sociologist, I work within a feminist-pragmatist epistemological stance (Cheruvallil-Contractor 2012, also Seigfried 1996). This is a collaborative approach

¹ For example: Al-Jayyousi et al. 2014; Linn 2015; Osman 2015 and Hamed 2014.

to research that facilitates the exploration of deeply held religious and spiritual values that are experienced, felt and revered by believers but which outside of religious/spiritual contexts are difficult, if not impossible, to measure or weigh. In this stance, research participants become collaborators, who work *with* the researcher to create new knowledge about their lives.

The feminist aspects of this stance are informed by a commitment within feminist philosophy to give agency to and advance the cause of any marginalised group (not just women). In feminist research the experiences of individuals, women and men, become inseparable from conceptions of knowledge hence making them 'knowers' (Harding 1987). This commitment to lived experience leads to the second aspect of my philosophical stance. Within pragmatist world-views ideas, philosophies, doctrines or actions become meaningful only through the practical consequences they have for individuals. As an epistemology pragmatism is 'more concerned with the problem that is being investigated rather than the methods being used to research it' (Creswell 2003: 11). Methodologically, this feminist-pragmatism allows for a synthesis of multiple research methods. In the case of lived realities of Muslim mothers, it is essential to use methods that are flexible enough to reflect the complexities of *their* experiences and *their* truths.

This research begins with a discussion of the complexities within the category 'Muslim women' and a caveat that it is often over-simplified, in both academic and popular writing. Badran distinguishes between Muslim women and the 'Muslimwoman', the latter she feels is a construction that 'has limited utility and limited credibility' (2008: 106, also Jawad 2003). Yet it is important for feminist research to work *with* Muslim women, to hear their voices and access their 'side' of the story. The young Muslim women I spoke to were very different from each other and came from diverse ethnic, social, class and religious backgrounds. They believed in different ways, either because they formally belonged to a particular religious tradition within Islam or more informally because they chose to practise their faith in a way that was personal to them:

I am different from every single person who is walking on this planet. I am different from my best friend who is also a Muslim and who is also from an Asian community. Every single person differs in their own way. Everyone has their own values, their own way of thinking, speaking. There are also certain things that unite everybody in the world. We are all human; we have certain universal values, of what is right and wrong. There is too much emphasis on what it is that makes us different from these people and then there is too much emphasis to say we are exactly like you.

Shaila² (26)³

Researching Motherhood and Mothering

The first part of this article will deal with the theological discourses within which Muslim women locate their motherhood. For this section, Islamic religious

² Name changed to protect participant's identity.

³ The number in brackets refers to the age of participants at the time of the interview.

doctrine on motherhood, as laid out in the foundational Islamic texts – the Quran⁴ and the *sunnah*,⁵ will be analysed. This analysis involved a systematic review of confessional texts that are popular in various Muslim communities. There is a plethora of material – books, pamphlets, video and audio recordings of lectures, blogs, poetry and articles – about motherhood and Islam. Such material does not constitute academic engagement, but they are written from a confessional, religious standpoint and are aimed at religious audiences.

The second part of this article is anthropological engagement with the lives of young Muslim women living in Britain, as understood through their voices and narratives. This research began with the premise that Muslim women are usually either mis-voiced or under-voiced, and that their stories are told by others. I set out to work with these women to reinstate them as storytellers who told their own stories. Over a two year period (2008–2010), I undertook ethnographic work, including semi-structured interviews with, young Muslim women in seven locations – student Islamic Societies at four universities and three community-based higher education institutions of Islamic studies. This study of Muslim mothering is new work that includes unpublished material from the same dataset. In my research participants had the freedom to choose what they wanted to speak about – to share *their* opinions and experiences about matters that *they* felt were significant in their lives, one of the subjects they spoke about was motherhood. As a demonstration of the successes of feminist consciousness-raising, many women stated that the interviews made them reflect on the multi-faceted roles they played in society, including as mothers. From an ethical perspective, women were given the choice of being anonymous or not and this is reflected in this article, where for some women pseudonyms chosen by themselves have been used to protect their identity. All women were given the opportunity to read interview transcripts and to comment on the research findings (Cheruvallil-Contractor 2012).

In total, I interviewed 52 Muslim women who represent a diverse cross section of Muslim life in Britain. A further seven women participated in group discussions to discuss and debate the findings of this research. Diverse, cultural and ethnic backgrounds are included in this sample – around 60% of participants were of south Asian heritage, the rest were of Arab, African, South East Asian and Western European heritage. The sample reflects national statistics for the British Muslim population and includes British citizens and recent migrants including overseas students. Most participants were either studying for higher education degrees or had recently begun professional careers. Yet many were the first in their family to go to university. Rather than represent privilege, these women's education and careers represent a socially mobile community that is in a transitory phase. Women in the research sample had different ways of believing and came from different denominational backgrounds. Six participants were training to be *alimahs* or religious scholars. Three were full-time mothers. Three did not wear a hijab or headscarf; two wore a niqab or face veil. Three were converts to Islam. At the time of the interviews, most participants were in the age range 18–34. Three women were older, in the age range 35–42. Not all the women I spoke to were mothers. When I began the research only 11 of

⁴ The core Islamic scripture – Muslims believe the Quran to be the word of God.

⁵ Normative prophetic practice as recorded in books of *hadith*.

the women were mothers, and during the research process a further six became mothers, yet a large proportion (80%) spoke about motherhood or having children. Women who were already mothers spoke from their own experiences and those who were not spoke about the literature they had read, social expectation and also their own hopes, plans and concerns about motherhood. Many women, reflecting on the experiences of their own mothers and grandmothers, spoke about how motherhood has changed.

The two parts of this article as outlined above may be described as examining Muslim motherhood as an institution and mothering as the lived experience of Muslim women. In the first section, I therefore examine the religious texts, social practices and cultural expectations that underpin institutional constructs of Muslim motherhood. In the latter section, I examine the lived experiences of Muslim women and the ways in which their voices are both challenging and perhaps in some ways reinforcing institutional constructs.

Muslim Motherhood – Analysing Core Religious Texts

To begin with God: in Islamic theology, God is not comparable to any other being.⁶ God is not gendered, neither male nor female and is usually referred to in Muslim communities and texts using the gender neutral term Allah.⁷ Yet God may be *known* and understood through attributes as represented in the ninety-nine names of God, some of which are described as masculine and others as feminine.⁸ According to the British Muslim scholar Timothy Winter⁹ (1999):

The Sufi metaphysicians were drawing on a longstanding distinction between the Divine Names that were called Names of Majesty (*jala*), and the Names of Beauty (*jama*). The Names of Majesty included Allah as Powerful (*al-Qawi*), Overwhelming (*al-Jabbar*), Judge (*al-Hakam*); and these were seen as pre-eminently masculine. Names of Beauty included the All-Compassionate (*al-Rahman*), the Mild (*al-Halim*), the Loving-kind (*al-Wadud*), and so on: seen as archetypally feminine.

A principal name of God is *al-Rahman* (the merciful), which appears at the beginning of all but one of the chapters of the Quran, has the same root as the Arabic word for womb *Raham*, and thereby indicates a proximity between Allah and a mother – both create and both show mercy. In the *sunnah* a comparison is made between God's mercy and the mercy of a mother:

*Salman reported that Allah's Messenger said: Verily, Allah created, on the same very day when He created the heavens and the earth, one hundred parts of mercy. Every part of mercy is coextensive with the space between the heavens and the earth and He out of this mercy endowed one part to the earth and it is because of this that the mother shows affection to her child.*¹⁰

⁶ Quran, Chapter 112, verses 1–4.

⁷ This is the term for God used in Arab Christian communities too.

⁸ Although I note that such readings make assumptions about what is masculine and what is feminine, which may promulgate gender stereotypes in other ways.

⁹ Also known as Abdal Hakim Murad.

¹⁰ Sahih Muslim, book 50, hadith 25.

Furthermore Islamic theology does not include the concept of 'original sin' and subsequent impacts on women, which according to some readings of the Bible include menstruation and childbirth as a punishment (Guzzo 2012). In Islamic readings, Adam and Eve both share responsibility for eating the forbidden fruit¹¹ and labour is emphatically not seen as punishment imposed on all women as a result of Eve's role in the 'original sin'. Instead, the experience of becoming and then being a mother is described as a journey into spirituality, success for women, honour in this world and the hereafter and as a woman's *jihad* or struggle for salvation. According to Schleifer, the relationship of the Muslim to his or her parents includes spiritual, financial and emotional aspects. She asserts that 'in general most statements of responsibility to parents include both father and mother, but the mother, in Islam is granted more in this respect' (1986: 7). This is an oft-repeated theme in the Quran and the *sunnah*. This is explored further in the sections below.

Motherhood in the Quran and the Sunnah

The Quran, which Muslims believe is divinely revealed and is God's own words, is relatively silent on motherhood and mothers. The two verses that directly refer to mothers and which provide guidance on motherhood are simple instructions to the reader to be grateful to their mothers who bore them with 'much weakness':

And We have enjoined upon man concerning his parents – His mother beareth him in weakness upon weakness, and his weaning is in two years – Give thanks unto Me and unto thy parents. Unto Me is the journeying.¹²

There are also other verses that are often quoted in relation to motherhood, however these directly relate to both parents and, as in the previous case, these verses instruct the reader to be kind to their parents and to treat them with respect.¹³ Another important mention that the Quran makes of motherhood is that a mother is a legal heir of her child:

And to each of his parents a sixth of the inheritance, if he has a child; and if he has no child and his parents are his heirs, then to his mother one third; and if he has brothers (or sisters), then to his mother the sixth, after the payment of any legacies or debts. Your parents and your children: Ye know not which of them is nearer unto you in usefulness.¹⁴

The *sunnah*, which may be understood as the normative practice of Prophet Muhammad as recorded in the books of *hadith*,¹⁵ provides narratives that are similar to those in the Quran with regard to respect for mothers (and indeed for both parents). What is particularly significant is similar brevity in the *sunnah* with regard to motherhood. While there are a number of *hadith* that discuss motherhood, most of them repeat a similar idea or theme. In the *hadith*, in

¹¹ Quran, Chapter 7, verse 20–25.

¹² Quran, Chapter 31, verse 14 and similar theme in Chapter 46, verse 15.

¹³ Quran, Chapter 17, verse 23–24 and similar theme in Chapter 29, verse 8.

¹⁴ Quran, Chapter 4, verse 11.

¹⁵ Collections of individual narratives from Prophet Muhammad's lifetime.

addition to treating mothers with kindness there is an emphasis on the value that Islam places on the mother and the respect that must be given to her:

*It was narrated from Mu'awiyah bin Jahimah As-Sulami, that Jahimah came to the Prophet and said: 'O Messenger of Allah! I want to go out and fight (in jihad) and I have come to ask your advice.' He said: 'Do you have a mother?' He said: 'Yes.' He said: 'Then stay with her, for Paradise is beneath her feet.'*¹⁶

*Narrated Abu Huraira: A man came to Allah's Messenger and said, 'O Allah's Messenger! Who is more entitled to be treated with the best companionship by me?' The Prophet said, 'Your mother'. The man said, 'Who is next?' The Prophet said, 'Your mother'. The man further said, 'Who is next?' The Prophet said, 'Your mother'. The man asked for the fourth time, 'Who is next?' The Prophet said, 'Your father'.*¹⁷

Mothers in the Texts

In Islamic foundational texts, the institution of motherhood is a valued aspect of women's roles, yet significantly other than discussing respect and kindness for mothers (and fathers), these texts remain relatively silent on what motherhood should actually be. Further clarity about motherhood may be achieved by examining the mothers who are mentioned in the texts. The Quran refers by name to Mary¹⁸ as the mother of Jesus Christ, other mothers are only identified by their roles in Islamic history – for example, Mary's mother,¹⁹ Moses' biological mother²⁰ and his adoptive mother.²¹ Finally the prophet's wives are nominated as the *ummahat al momineen* or the mothers of the believers.²² These women are varyingly described as supporters of the truth,²³ who are inspired by God, who looks after their interests and does not let them grieve.²⁴ The *sunnah* similarly mentions four women who are recognised as archetypal role models and examples to all of mankind.²⁵ These women, Asiya (Moses' adoptive mother), Mary (the mother of Jesus), Khadija (the first wife of Prophet Muhammad) and Fatima (a daughter of Prophet Muhammad) had very diverse lives, and although all were mothers in different ways, the texts also record that they were not 'just mothers'.

Asiya, according to Islamic traditions, is the wife of the biblical Pharaoh who found Moses and adopted him – she is also described as a defiant queen, who chose to give refuge to a child who would have otherwise been killed and who in later life chose to practise the religion preached by Moses, in direct rebellion against her husband. Similarly, in the Quran, the story of Mary starts from

¹⁶ Sunan an-Nasa'i, book 25, hadith 20.

¹⁷ Sahih al-Bukhari, book 78, hadith 2. Similar narrations in the other books of hadith.

¹⁸ For example, the name of Chapter 19 of the Quran is Maryam which is the Arabic name for Mary.

¹⁹ Quran Chapter 3, verse 35–36.

²⁰ Quran, Chapter 20, verse 30–40.

²¹ Quran, Chapter 28, verse 9 and Chapter 66, verse 11.

²² Quran, Chapter 33, verse 6.

²³ Mary as described in the Quran, Chapter 5, verse 75.

²⁴ Quran, Chapter 28, verse 13. This is about Moses' biological mother.

²⁵ Jami' at-Tirmidhi, vol. 1, book 46, hadith 3878.

before the birth of her son, Jesus, who in the Quran is usually referred to as *Isa ibn Maryam* or Jesus the son of Mary; the popular hierarchy is reversed so that Jesus is known as the son of his mother. This perhaps epitomises the Quranic treatment of Mary, not just as the mother of Jesus, but rather as Mary the woman – whose own piety, religious empowerment, strength and blessedness was recognised *before* the birth of her son (Schleifer 1997). Furthermore in Muslim narratives, Joseph (Mary's husband in the Gospel) does not exist, so Mary is a single mother who deals with social prejudice and bringing up her child on her own. Khadija and Fatima's stories may also be (re)told as above to include motherhood as only one aspect of the rich and nuanced lives that these women led. Khadija was a successful businesswoman and Fatima an authoritative scholar. Such histories of women, who continue to inhabit Muslim collective memories, inform and influence the religious and feminist epistemes of diverse Muslim women. Another *hadith* mentions Aisha (a wife of the Prophet) as among the best of women.²⁶ It is noteworthy that Aisha never had any children, demonstrating that in Islamic contexts a woman can be among the best without necessarily being a mother. Asiya, the adoptive mother of Moses, similarly did not have biological children of her own.

The interpretation of texts is necessarily a mediated process that is influenced by the contexts within which the interpretation takes place. Islamic foundational texts like other texts maybe interpreted in diverse ways. The theological narratives of motherhood and mothering as discussed in this section may be considered feminist and egalitarian in that motherhood is not privileged as being the sole factor upon which a woman's spiritual or worldly success is predicated. In these narratives motherhood does not subvert everything else in a woman's life. Indeed she can be 'successful' without being a mother at all. Such emancipatory narratives empower women with knowledge of their faith and potentially give them the authority to challenge patriarchal constructs of motherhood, which also exist within Muslim contexts and which are explored in the next section.

Patriarchal Readings of Motherhood

The French feminist philosopher Michèle Le Doeuff (1998) writes about the marginalisation of women from the processes of knowledge creation and dissemination. Within Muslim *milieus*, this marginalisation of women from epistemes of knowledge is demonstrated in the predominance of literature on women's subjects that present interpretations of the religious doctrine that are antithetical to the understandings discussed above. Often, but not always, these are written by men and promote patriarchal constructs of society. In such literature, discussions about women and their roles seem to be limited to two rather over-signified subjects – the *hijab* as the epitome of women's religious practice²⁷ and motherhood, which in such texts seems to be her only route to success: 'It's easy to have the impression that some Muslim women even think that fecundity is an article of faith!' (Khattab 2007: 57).

²⁶ Sahih Muslim, book 44, hadith 102, also Sahih al-Bukhari book 62, hadith 116.

²⁷ This article focuses on motherhood, for discussions on the hijab, see Cheruvallil-Contractor 2012.

Examining literature about Muslim women, it is evident that in many Muslim societies, patriarchal readings have come to dominate over others. Motherhood becomes the normative role for women, dominating their lives and aspirations – if women are to have any worth at all, they must have children. In such narratives Khadija is most celebrated for being the mother of Prophet Muhammad's children rather than for being the first person to intellectually engage with Islam or as a financial benefactor for early Islam. Similarly, Fatima (Prophet Muhammad's daughter) is eulogised as the mother of Hasan and Hussain (Prophet Muhammad's grandsons), and her own scholarly prowess is forgotten. Such narratives are underpinned by a notional suggestion to readers that women must lead a sheltered domestic life. This suggestion of a sheltered life for women is encapsulated in *Behisti Zewar* a book written in Urdu by Ashraf Ali Thanvi in the early 1900s²⁸ as a means to acquaint women with Islamic knowledge. Maududi, an influential South Asian Muslim scholar and writer, similarly concludes that there is little or no scope for women to enter public domains (1972). Both Thanvi and Maududi have significant following in British South Asian communities and their books are often recommended reading for young women, particularly those undertaking theological training. In their discussions of motherhood, such literature begins a process of social construction that conflates woman with mother and which makes motherhood a woman's only goal (Glenn 1994). It is significant to note that of my participants who had encountered these books, few found them relevant to their lives in Britain:

And one of these books by Ashraf Ali Thanvi called *Behishti Zewar* which is called the jewel of something.²⁹ And I must admit that, I didn't feel that a woman was being portrayed as an equal being. [...] it's been reprinted and people think that it's a very authentic book. But personally I found that as a Muslim woman it just didn't appeal to me nor to my intellect.

Amra (40)

A common theme that runs across the more modern of these texts is that they purport to construct Muslim motherhood by contrasting Islamic and 'Western' constructs of womanhood. Their portrayals of the 'Western' are generally criticisms of feminism and what they suggest are women's failed attempts to achieve social equality. In these texts, genuine social problems such as gang-culture, drug or sexual abuse are represented as normative in Western society and as problems which are caused by Western women's lack of focus on domestic roles. For example Khan writes, 'in luring women out of their natural sphere – the home and the bosom of the family' women have been forced into 'humiliating situations' where 'their innate maternal instincts and fine moral acuity become submerged and nullified in the treadmill of their daily working existence' (1995: 243). Maududi, in developing this theme, goes on to criticise those people who believe that 'a woman's position in a family is like a man' and that 'she should also be an earning member' who can have roles in 'doing social work, attending

²⁸ Some sources suggest that it was first published in 1905. I refer to the English translation by Masroor Khan Saroha (2000). It does not mention the date of original Urdu publication. However for convenience I will henceforth refer to this book as (Thanvi 1905).

²⁹ The name of the book translates to 'Heavenly Ornaments' or 'Heavenly Jewellery'.

municipal councils, participating in conferences and devoting her time [...] to tackle political, cultural and social problems' (Maududi 1972: 72). Such literature often transcends denominational and ethnic divisions to suggest that women 'have been created to bring forth children and rear children' (Maududi 1972: 120). Motherhood is over-signified as the only sphere where women may experience success. The same sources from within the foundational texts are used to build a compelling narrative that encourages Muslim women to focus on motherhood alone:

Families are thus the building blocks upon which rests the fate of society. For the development of good families, the mother plays a vital role. Many women today have aspirations of progress in their careers, and degrees in various fields. However it is indisputable that the most important achievement of a mother is the raising of sensible, virtuous children who will then move on to build other strong blocks for society. (Kasamali, undated)

Among the qualities that such literature emphasises for mothers are love, sacrifice, and dedication. According to *Ideal Mother*, a mother will be rewarded for her 'kind words, her spirit of selflessness and her outstanding character (Abdul Majid 2004: 89). Such constructs of motherhood are far-removed from motherhood as portrayed in foundational Islamic texts which in their relative silence towards motherhood create a space that does not impose motherhood onto women. Instead these readings that claim to be 'authentic', fall quite neatly into constructs of motherhood that feminist and mothering studies scholars seek to challenge:

Thus by depicting motherhood as natural, patriarchal ideology of mothering locks women into biological reproduction and denies them identities and selfhood outside mothering. (Glenn 1994: 9–10)

Such essentialising notions of motherhood can, at best, limit a woman's potential. At worst, they can make a woman feel inadequate and unsuccessful. This latter sentiment is thought-provokingly reflected in the comment from Fauzia:³⁰

I have been hurt many times by the words of people but I have never spoken to them as they have spoken to me. I never crossed the limits that Allah has recommended for a woman. I have been working since I was 20, almost 10 years now but have never done anything wrong. [...] I have given them [my parents] all the respect and *khidmat* (service) I could. But in return Allah has only given me a punishment which is that I have no children. I do not understand why this has happened to me. I know this is a stupid question. I have been blessed with so many things, but what I don't have haunts me.
Fauzia (30)

Fauzia's expresses deep pain and sadness – she considers her inability to have children as a punishment from the God she believes in, and who has otherwise blessed her in other ways. This inadequacy that Fauzia expresses may be understood as the result of religious and socio-cultural over-emphasis on motherhood and becoming a mother as 'a' (if not 'the') key aspect of a woman's role in society and her identity. According to Marsh, society valorises women's

³⁰ Name changed to protect participant's identity.

fertility and without becoming a mother (even if this was their choice) women are categorised as 'barren' or 'unwomanly' (Marsh 1997: 216–217). I see such attitudes as an extreme form of essentialised motherhood: woman is conflated with mother, there is no other avenue for her to be 'successful' and without motherhood she is valueless. She, in this case Fauzia, therefore feels inadequate if she cannot achieve this 'quintessence' of woman's success. Such notions of motherhood need to be challenged and indeed are challenged by the everyday realities of mothering. In the following section we examine such narratives of the everyday realities on Muslim women, their faith and their mothering.

Young Muslim Women and Motherhood

This section of this article moves away from foundational texts and theological arguments, to examine the lived experiences and everyday narratives of young Muslim women who have experienced motherhood, as mothers themselves and/or as daughters of their mothers. Motherhood the institution, as presented in the previous section, may be recognised in these women's narratives, as enshrined in their collective memories, based on their understandings of foundational Islamic texts and as experienced by their mothers. Together the voices of the young Muslim women who participated in this research, present a nuanced narrative of Muslim mothering experience in Britain and how this has changed over the generations:

Sometimes when my Mum goes to a function or something, I know the other women will ask her. 'How is your daughter doing?' And my Mum will always tell them that she is at university and she is doing her masters. And they [these women] are like – what's the point, she is going to get married, have children and stay at home, so what's the point of giving her all this education. My Mum will always say that she will study until she decides she doesn't want to study any more. Being a Muslim woman doesn't mean that you get married, have babies and stay in the kitchen all day. Religion doesn't tell you that. We also know that some of the greatest scholars were women. I think it's sad that people think that being a Muslim women means you sit in the kitchen and that's your life. You grow up, you hit puberty, you get married, and that's your life. I think that is so sad. Nazeera³¹ (24)

Motherhood the Institution: A Balancing Act

Motherhood often featured in the narratives of the young women I spoke to. These women were aware of the respect and honour that foundational Islamic texts assigned to mothers. As also noted, by Holloway (2008: 23) who reports that Bengali Muslim mothers in her research felt valued as mothers due to their religious observances, participants in my research discussed the 'special status' given to mothers who 'build up nations':

³¹ Name changed to protect participant's identity.

I think we play the most important role in Islam – as mother and wives. Because we give life to men, we bring them – a Human.
Zarnat (29)

According to most participants, motherhood was recognised as one of the several roles that they would play in their lives and which brought purpose to their lives.

It is Islam that has given women importance from childhood to old age. Till she dies she has been given a *marktaba* (status) and also a *maqsad* (aim) for life. She has a role to play and duties to fulfil as a daughter, as a sister, as a wife and as a mother, and then as a mother-in-law and as a grandmother too. Her life goes on with a different *maqsad* and she will never feel that she is *fariq* (idle)
Samreen (26)

These women also noted that mothers are the first and perhaps the most influential educators that a child encounters:

So Islamically the woman has a lot of influence on the kids. [...] I think it is the duty of every woman, they should seek to get an education. At the end of the day they are the mothers for the next generation and it's them who are going to bring the kid up.
Tasnim (21)

The young women I spoke to were not scholars or theologians and had very different levels of engagement with their faith. Their opinions about their faith ranged from detailed discussions about the 'beauty' of women's roles in Islam to more matter-of-fact statements and hesitant comments – 'I have heard so-and-so and intend/need to find out more'. This diversity was reflected in their discussions on motherhood. Despite this diversity of opinion and experience, there seemed to be considerable unanimity about the centrality of motherhood to women's lives. Participants described motherhood in diverse ways: some which conformed with societal and religious valorisations and others which sought to unpick these valorisations and find 'balances' between mothering and the other aspirations that they had. A small minority felt that motherhood was to be prioritised over everything else; however, when they reflected on their lives, even these participants said that they believed that balances were possible between motherhood and the aspirations that women may have such as higher education or a successful career.

A mother's impact on her child is very strong; she has to be there for her child. If I am married and I have kids I have to make sure that even if I go to Uni, I have to make sure that my priority is Allah first and then my family before I go to Uni. If these things are not 100% then I think that the Uni is kind of 50 – 50. But if I am able to multi-task in terms of my family and my *iman* (faith) is strong and at the same time I am in Uni and have balanced it all well, then I think it's okay for a woman to be in society.
Halima (20)

A few chose to prioritise their education or career over motherhood:

I know it is very important for me to get a job so that we can support ourselves – me and my husband. So that we can be self-sufficient and all the other things that my parents want me to do, that they probably did at a young age, for example,

have kids is something that I will do later on in my life, *InshaAllah* (God willing) but for now I think I am okay doing what I am doing really.
Eram³² (27)

Many felt they had 'moved on' from cultural readings of motherhood that they perceived as limiting. These women asserted that they had the opportunities to achieve the balances that they desired, and that there is more to a woman than being a mother:

It is everything for a woman – being a mother, to have a husband. But also, she should not forget that she is a woman herself which is something.
Zarnat (29)

Mothering and Change

Many participants asserted that their experience of being women and mothers was different from the experiences of women from previous generations. Over and over again they stated how mothering had changed since their 'mum's or grand mum's time'. Interviewees felt that the mothering experiences of older Muslim women usually conformed to patriarchal systems and cultures that they had inherited from outside of Britain, specifically from countries of their origin, in South Asia, the Middle East or elsewhere. Their mothers and grandmothers were not always educated; they lived domestic lives and only focused on bringing up their children.

I look at my Mum for example, she carries out her cultural role as a wife, but in Islam it's not obligatory for a wife to do certain things – for example she has to do all the cooking and the cleaning and the husband is the dominant one. That's what culture says. Islam is not about all of that.
Shahida³³ (19)

Participants suggested a number of reasons for their mothers' and grandmothers' domestic lives, the most crucial being that these women did not understand their faith and subscribed to understandings of motherhood that were cultural but not necessarily religious. Although Islam gives women rights, older women didn't know about these rights and so 'didn't expect to have them'. According to Sumaiya (23), this was not only a Muslim problem – in a society where systems of knowledge were controlled by men, denial of rights was experienced by all women:

I think it comes from the older generations, and it not just in the Muslim world but also in the non-Muslim world, because ages ago, women here didn't have rights. It's only when feminism came and suffragettes and what have you came, it's only then that women started to have rights.

Significantly participants in this research emphasised both the Britishness and 'Muslimness' of their identities and lives. Since they lived in Britain, younger women had access to educational systems that gave them the tools

³² Name changed to protect participant's identity.

³³ Name changed to protect participants' identity.

to critically engage with their faith and its foundational texts. Participants also recognised that living in Britain allowed them to have complicated discussions about their faith and its impact on gender roles, which would not have been possible in the countries where their parents or grandparents originated from (Cheruvallil-Contractor 2012). This they said enabled them to differentiate between social practices that were religious and those that purported to be religious but which participants recognised as being influenced by their parents' culture.

They need to change this culture. Culture is not Islam [pause] culture is made by people, by society [pause] it is not Islam.

Farhana (18)

Participants emphasised this distinction between culture and religion, insisting that it was of consequence to women's lived experience. Whereas the former may limit women's social roles, most women I spoke to asserted that their faith, particularly as laid out in the foundational texts is emancipatory for women, giving them clear social roles and recognising their contributions to society beyond motherhood. For these women it was important for Muslim women and Muslim society as a whole to move away from cultural understandings of faith and instead 'reclaim their faith'. In this process, education has a key role to play. In young Muslim women's narratives, older women appeared both as resisters-to-change and also as agents-of-change who supported and inspired the younger women to aspire for social roles beyond the home, as in Najla's (23) experience – 'My mum wasn't educated, but that is one of the reasons she pushes so hard for us to be educated'. In some cases, as in Khadija's³⁴ (23), younger women have had to rebel or 'struggle' to achieve this change. Khadija has graduated from university and is now a science teacher:

Alhamdulillah (praise be to God) I didn't myself come from a very practising background. My Mum also had similar views about women – they should stay at home. But I managed somehow to get out with quite a lot of struggle. And I've come this far. *Alhamdulillah*. [...] Now my mother she looks at me and she is very proud. And she is like.... Well I used to think like this before and now looking at you and what you've done I have begun to think differently.

Mothers as Role Models

A large proportion of the women described their mothers as their role models. This was striking in frequency and also in the similarity of comments that were made:

My role model is my Mum. She is amazing and she is my role model.
Kaniz³⁵ (20)

My role model is my mother, both my parents but mostly my mother because she is a very good mother and she manages to encourage me to become a good

³⁴ Name changed to protect participant's identity.

³⁵ Name changed to protect participant's identity.

Muslim person while keeping an open mind about other people around me and encourages me to do my best in everything.
Safiyya (22)

These comments may be read in two ways. Firstly, they are testament to the strength of these older women, their commitment to their children and their enduring importance in the lives of their children. Secondly, there is a separate sociological commentary about the lack of role models in the public domain with whom young Muslims can identify. It is here where feminist consciousness-raising has a role to play in uncovering both historical and contemporary narratives of Muslim women leadership. There is some evidence that this is already happening, for example Noor's list of her role models includes historical personalities (including some who were mentioned previously in this article). Noor also includes her mother in this list:

I think obviously my first role models will be the wives of the Prophet, because I think they are very inspirational women and you know general religious figures have this same characteristic – Mary the mother of Isa (Jesus Christ) is very inspirational. Fatima Zahra, Aisha, all of them, *mashaAllah* (God willed it) give me the inspiration to stand up for what is right. And then second of all is my Mum, she brought me up to think the way I do. She gives me guidance I think, on how to go on in life.
Noor (21)

Yet although women frequently identified historical and theological female personalities, only rarely were they able to name contemporary women (other than their mothers) as role models:

Women are being underestimated. That is why we do not have any great Muslim women leaders.
Norazian (30)

Further research and activism is needed to examine what is a role model, how women identify role models, to raise the profile of contemporary role models and to ensure that female role models are not valorised or made to conform to patriarchal constructs of womanhood and indeed motherhood.

Being a Mother: Finding Commonality?

The meaning of 'woman' or the category 'woman' is complex. In my discussions with Muslim women, the category was further complicated by women's inclusions of their 'Muslimness' as an aspect within their categorisation. Some participants felt they were not that different from other women who were not Muslim. According to Samina (29):

I acknowledge that the differences between a non-Muslim woman and Muslim woman are not much and the day-to-day challenges are the same.

Others disagreed and felt that they were different from other women – their 'Muslimness' made them different.

Yes definitely because I follow Islam and we do have restrictions like we can't drink, we can't mix freely with men. I am 100% different from non-Muslim women. I am a Muslim and I know the rules of being a Muslim.

Norazian (30)

Yet when participants reflected on their lives they began to see commonalities in their lived experience that they shared with women from other backgrounds and mothering was an area of commonality that came up in discussions in different ways. When women discussed their own roles as mothers or plans to be mothers, this seemed to encourage more reflection about what it meant to *be* a woman.

InshaAllah I have the aspirations that many women wish to have in society today – family, children, career. That's about it.

Safiyya (21)

For Samreen (26), *becoming* and then *being* a mother changed her perceptions of womanhood and of herself. When I first spoke to her, she was expecting her first child. During this first interview, Samreen was keen to emphasise that as a Muslim woman, her faith made her different and distinct from other women. After the birth of her child, on her own initiative, Samreen contacted me and asked to be interviewed again. When I enquired why, she said that after becoming a mother, she had reflected on her 'woman-ness'. She realised that mothering was something many women shared and she wanted this 'commonality in experience' to be reflected in her constructions of womanhood and in how her voice was represented in my research on Muslim women. The following is an excerpt from her second interview:

Samreen: Of course we are [similar]. When women have babies, many want to leave their jobs and careers because they want to spend time with their children. When I walk through town in the afternoon, I see more women than men and all with their babies. But I think you must take cognisance of the fact that Muslim women are different on one-point.

Sariya: But aren't we similar on another point?

Samreen: That's because we are all women. I feel that 50% we are the same and 50% we are different. And out of this second 50%, 25% is legitimate difference but the other 25% is been made to *seem different* [Samreen's emphasis]. You cannot base opinions of Muslim women on the actions of a few, just as we Muslim women cannot judge all non-Muslim women by the actions of a few women. [...] I have seen many who are highly educated, well-dressed and who have strong values by which they live their life.³⁶

Similarly when asked to reflect on her motherhood, Imaan (33) conceded that she too could be similar to Western women:

Imaan: Am I different? Yes I think so. I am 33 now and have a family with three kids. I have lots of responsibility and less freedom.

³⁶ Samreen spoke in Urdu. She had the opportunity to verify and edit the interview transcript.

Sariya: Other women your age who have babies and who are managing home and work. Aren't you very similar to such women?

I: The British women?

Sariya: Yes?

Imaan: the British women would not have got married by 30 [pause] I don't know. Some women, I would be similar to them, if they are having kids and doing a career and some others stay with their kids until they are older, everybody takes it differently.

Samreen went through a process of reflecting on her identity and her existence in a diverse world. She first only saw how unique and different she was from other women. Yet there is 'much common ground between the experiences of women, regardless of faith or other attempts to categorise difference' (Benn and Jawad 2003: 172). And becoming a mother helped Samreen see what this common ground may be. However, Imaan, who was already a mother, only needed to reflect for a few moments. A sense of ambiguity and need for discussion about the category 'woman' is one that has permeated feminist thinking in different ways. Robin Morgan writes about how she nurtured a 'secret contempt for other women who weren't as strong, free, and respected [by men]' as she thought she was (Morgan 1970: xv) until she realised that women were actually in it all together (she too mentions having a baby as partly causing this change of mind). Mothering, despite the diverse ways in which it is experienced by different women, seems to transcend the categorisation of women, creating a space where despite their diversities, different women can find commonality. Zahra³⁷ (32) reflects on this in her narrative for my research:

Assalam Alaikum,³⁸ I am Zahra, I am a woman, a Muslim, at work, a cook, a cleaner, a hug offerer, a tear-wiper, a comforter too. I am a mother. I am a witness to the tremendous love and mercy of the Almighty Allah. I invite you to join me on part of my eventful journey of motherhood. A journey that is shared by women from all walks of life and backgrounds.

Conclusion: Muslim Women and Motherhood – A Powerful Space

As an 'Abrahamic faith', Islam shares key aspects of its history, theology and socio-cultural values with Christianity and Judaism, and within Muslim cultures, as in Jewish and Christian narratives, dominant social discourses around motherhood tend to centre on self-sacrifice and domesticity. In these narratives, motherhood and being a mother is presented as the most important, if not the only, role that a woman undertakes in her life, and from which she may gain 'success in this world and the hereafter'. Yet as demonstrated in this article, a critical reading of the foundational texts of Islam, the Quran and the *sunnah*, indicates that crucially these core texts are silent on what motherhood should entail for a woman. They do not set 'dos and don'ts' and certainly do not insist on a

³⁷ Name changed to protect participant's identity.

³⁸ Traditional and commonly used Muslim greeting; it translates to, 'may peace be with you'.

particular mould that Muslim mothers should conform to. While some may say that such a reading is feminist or that it is a woman's reading that is relevant to women alone, I argue that this is a reading that simply examines the core texts while being cognisant of avoiding the 'embellishments' that socially-influenced commentaries have added to them. In this sense, it may be a feminist reading; however, more significantly it is a return to or reclamation of the core texts.

There are two strands within participants' narratives of motherhood. Firstly participants describe a more institutional or 'cultural' form of motherhood, which participants sought to challenge. Their collective memories remind them of their own strong mothers and also mothers who are mentioned in religious texts. Motherhood has become one of the many fronts on which young Muslim women are reclaiming their faith. Their discussions of motherhood indicate a refreshing pairing between classical Islamic sciences and contemporary feminist thought – both agree that motherhood can be a powerful space for women's agency. Secondly, participants reflecting on their mothering experiences often stated that being a mother was an experience shared by many women and a space where it was possible to find commonality within a diverse and decentred sisterhood of women – Muslim women believed they 'shared' with their 'sisters'.

Within their diverse and multifaceted struggles, young Muslim women in this research use 'the master's tools to dismantle the master's house' (to (mis)use Audre Lorde's (1984) metaphor). They are re-reading the foundational Islamic texts and are using both their faith and their feminism to challenge patriarchy on different fronts. Far from being limited by it, participants in this research, young and educated Muslim women in Britain, are gradually reconstructing motherhood as a powerful space where Muslim women may look inwards at their own agency as authoritative interpreters of core texts and where they may also look outwards into the sisterhood, to forge bridges of commonality, empathy and dialogue.

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