

CONSCIOUSNESS BLOSSOMING: ISLAMIC FEMINISM AND QUR'ANIC  
EXEGESIS IN SOUTH ASIAN MUSLIM DIASPORA COMMUNITIES

By

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

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Abstract

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My dissertation asks if and in what capacities everyday South Asian transnational Muslim women are engaged in feminist interpretations or exegesis of the Qur'an. Furthermore, if everyday women are actively conducting interpretation, my research seeks to formulate and clarify the different paths women take in their understanding of the Qur'an. I hypothesize that transnational Muslim females in the West are located in a liminal space, and that it is this very point of dislocation that is likely to propel them to engage, interpret and ultimately be empowered to question existing masculine interpretations of the Qur'an.

This dissertation utilized ethnographic methodology to explore the varied pathways everyday South Asian Muslim women take in their understanding of the Qur'an.



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## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

My dissertation asks if and in what capacities everyday South Asian transnational Muslim women are engaged in feminist interpretations or exegesis of the Qur'an. Furthermore, if everyday women are engaged in interpretation, my research seeks to formulate and clarify the different paths women take in their understanding of the Qur'an. I hypothesize that transnational Muslim females in the West are located in a liminal space, and that it is this very point of dislocation that is likely to propel them to engage, interpret and ultimately be empowered to question existing masculine interpretations of the Qur'an.

Muslim females suffer the consequences of oppressive interpretations of the Qur'an (Ahmed, 1992; Barlas, 2002). Access to the Qur'an's teachings is mediated by Qur'anic *tafsir*, which is explanation, interpretation, commentary and elucidation, undertaken to understand the Qur'an and its commandments. The Qur'an and its *tafsir* encode law, culture and the mores and norms of Muslim societies. Qur'anic interpretation has almost exclusively been conducted by males who have enshrouded the Qur'an with their masculine world-views (Ahmed 1992; Wadud, 1999; Barlas, 2002). Male exegetes embedded a correspondence between the Qur'an and its *tafsir*; therefore exegesis has become entangled and confused with the contents of the Qur'an itself (Arkoun, 1994). Thus, according to Amina Wadud (1999), Asma Barlas (2002) and other female scholars (Ahmed, 1992) it is not the Qur'an that is "misogynist, patriarchal and oppressive" but rather its interpretations and its interpreters. Academically there is a resurgence and renaissance in Qur'anic exegesis by female Muslim scholars in the West, who are attempting to recapture "the stubbornly egalitarian voice of Islam" (Ahmed,

1992). Female academics have actively engaged in Qur'anic *tafsir* to reveal the egalitarian language of Islam and locate it as a legitimate counter voice to the patriarchal, authoritarian Islam.

### Female Empowerment, Agency and Resistance

This ethnography will explore South Asian everyday Muslim interpretative communities. In looking at the daily-lived processes of Muslim women's ideology, I will show that the commitment Muslim women have to Islam, is more complex and multi-vocal than Western scholars have realized. This investigation is of vital importance as it strives to bridge the gap between feminist theory and praxis and build a new narrative on women's empowerment that takes into account culture, context, and history.

I want to briefly touch upon the concepts of feminism, agency and resistance and what they mean or can mean for different women in disparate cultural milieus. Additionally, I want to make clear that the manner and ways that women manifest agency, resistance and empowerment, can take very alternative avenues than that of Western liberal feminism. Cooke and Badran raise the possibility of contemplating feminism and agency in different ways. They ask the question:

“What do we mean by feminism, feminist discourse and feminist vision? Are the connotations the same for the Arab [South Asian] world as for Europe and America? Or, is there discrete feminism that emerges in response to indigenous circumstances?”

(Cooke and Badran, 1990: xvii).

In the West, secular expectations regarding human nature and agency have become essential to and naturalized in the discourse and scholarship regarding feminism and gender (Abu-Lughod, 1990; Cook and Badran, 1990; Mahmood, 2004). Feminism is an integral part of laic liberal policies and thus has a strong secular component to it. How then is the analysis of agency worked out in this laic liberal feminism? Within this secular matrix, agency is assumed to be the ability to discern ones own interest against the pressures of culture, custom, supernatural will and any other collective or individual barrier ( Mahmood, 2004).

However, Abu-Lughod (1990) asks the challenging question: how might researchers identify occurrences of women's resistance without:

“misattributing to them forms of consciousness or politics that are not part of their experience- something like a feminist consciousness or feminist politics.”

(Abu-Lughod, 1990: 47).

An example of what Abu-Lughod elucidates above, can be illustrated in the case of nuclear families. In the 1970's, American white feminists attempted to dissolve the nuclear family, which they considered to be a fundamental component in the ongoing oppression of women. However, African American and Native American feminists strongly protested such a move. They articulated that rather than oppressing them, the ability to have children and to create nuclear families were actually acts of feminist resistance, and constituted agency for African American and Native American women (McCann and Kim, 2003).

This case demonstrates the divergent ways that different groups can encounter a social structure. On one hand, white middle class women regarded the proliferation of nuclear families as a tool of patriarchal oppression. Whilst their Native American and African American counterparts, perceived the negation of nuclear families as a manifest



oppression of white hegemonic powers: patriarchy, genocide, racism and slavery.

African American and Native American feminists made clear that white America had oppressed them by dissolving their families, communities and social networks. In order to resist patriarchy, these women needed to rebuild these social entities (Sandoval, 1991; Mohanty, 1991). Therefore, while white middle class women located feminism, resistance and agency in their ability to stop creating children and in the breakage of family links, other women situated feminism, resistance and agency in the creation of children and those very same bonds.

Resistance can be a fluid and complex process. The overriding assumption is that women are only resisting patriarchy. However, in practice women ultimately end up resisting multiple oppressive structures. The “Black feminist statement” by the Combine River collective (Smith, 2000), simultaneously demonstrates the alternative meanings that feminism embodies and makes clear the intricate matrix of oppression that many groups navigate. In repudiating calls for lesbian separatism and solidarity by white feminists, African American women fore-grounded race as a critical element in feminism that overrode gender (Sandoval, 1991).

Thus, for African American feminists the reality of coalition building with Black men, to overcome their shared history of racial oppression and institutional racism, was more significant than that of their shared oppression, with white women by patriarchy (Smith, 2000; McCann and Kim, 2003). Consequently women are simultaneously and intricately embedded in multiple webs of power (Sandoval, 1991; Mohanty, 1991). Moreover, the feminist analytical matrix becomes ever more convoluted when it becomes clear that patriarchy itself is perceived differently by divergent groups of women. Whilst African American women and White women are both simultaneously oppressed by patriarchy, that oppression is not perceived equally by both groups.

Patriarchy for African American women does not translate into oppression by males alone, but is comprehended as oppression by white males and white women (McCann and Kim, 2003).

Longwe states that “Empowerment ...cannot be given...it has to be taken” (2000:30) and declares that empowerment is a highly personal experience; that an individual feels empowered through his or her own achievements. Longwe further articulates, “the process of challenging existing power relations, and of gaining greater control over the sources of power, may be termed *empowerment*” (author italics, 1994: 130). My analysis of everyday female engagement with the Qur’an attempts to understand how each woman’s empowerment is conceived by Muslim females themselves. Furthermore, the study highlights the issues and intersections of power formation, gender, religion, class, and negotiation. In order to comprehend Muslim women’s own understanding of their lives, we need to perceive how women operate in a religious environment and what role, if it does have a role, religion plays in feminine empowerment.

Agency for Nila Kabeer is inclusive of “the meaning, motivation and purpose which individuals bring to their activity, *their sense of agency, or “the power within”* (1999: 440). *My italics.* Mahmood raises an interest point regarding agency, asking:

“If the ability to effect change in the world and in oneself is historically and culturally specific (both in terms of *what constitutes change* and the measure by which it is effected) then *the meaning and sense of agency cannot be fixed in advance, but must emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility and effectively”*

(Mahmood, 2004:14). *My italics.*

What the above examples clearly elucidates, is that feminism and feminist discourses are outcomes of specific places, periods, histories, races and classes. Thus, the question that Cooke and Badran asks “What do we mean by feminism, feminist discourse and feminist vision?” may actually not have a concrete answer. As we saw above, definitions of feminism are not synonymous cross culturally or even inter-culturally. So what definition of feminism can we apply to this dissertation and to the women interpreting the Qur’an? The broad definition of feminism that Cooke and Badran apply is a good starting point for this research, where they define feminism as involving:

“one or more of the following: an awareness by women that as women [*and within the matrix of race, sexuality, color class, and time*] they are systematically placed in a disadvantaged position; some form of rejection of enforced behaviors and thought; and attempts to interpret their own experiences and then to improve their position or lives as women. “

Cooke and Badran, 1990: xviii-xix) (*My insertions*)

### Scholarly Feminist Engagement

Academics such as Asma Barlas, Amina Wadud, and Riffat Hasan have actively engaged with the Qur’an to produce more egalitarian readings: Hassan’s (1998) research lays bare the erroneous notion that Eve (Woman) was made out of Adam’s (Man) rib and was thus created just for man’s enjoyment: Wadud’s exegesis (1999) questions the idea that Adam (Man) was created before Eve (Woman): and Barlas’s reading (2002) reflects a Qur’an that is set on destroying patriarchy and father-rule. These readings have deep repercussions with respect to gender construction and power relations within Islam.

Much of the aforementioned work is underpinned by an Islamic feminist paradigm. Islamic feminism is a faith-based theory, in which Islam is used to challenge oppressive social structures and contextualize, and interpret concepts of equality and equity between men and women (Afshar, 1998; Cooke, 2001; Badran, 2004). For the above female Muslim exegetes, Islam contains within it *the spark and the power within* to actively destabilize patriarchy. Islamic feminism centers the Qur'an at the heart of its pedagogy and paradigm. It is a dynamic vehicle for Muslims who want to counter female oppression as part of their faith. Additionally, Islamic feminism circumvents the conservative patriarchal Muslim view that feminism is a western ideology, which must be rejected to be true to Islam (Cook, 2001; Badran, 2004).

My research endeavors to synthesize and integrate the various ways of construing empowerment, whereby women approach their own aspirations in the domestic and public realm. This inquiry is extremely critical and relevant to understanding concepts of women's rights, agency, and empowerment, since transformation - understanding of religion, self-determination, agency, empowerment, and movement in cultural production - must all arise at the personal and grassroots level in order to be effective and sustained. By empowerment I mean personal empowerment, something internal that women can compose and strengthen themselves and that is not contingent on others (Rowland, 1997).

Islamic feminism and scholarly discourse utilizing an Islamic feminist paradigm is potentially extremely exciting, since it attempts to utilize and integrate multiple analytical categories in examining the worldview of individuals. However, I would argue that this dialogue is limited to a very small and exclusive academic community. Failure to refigure and diffuse this elite thesis to everyday women undermines its seemingly transformative powers.

## Western Renderings of Islam

Islam in western literature has largely tended to be represented as a monolithic patriarchal entity. Abu Lughod (1989) states that by portraying Islam as a monolith, certain scholars are predisposed to make simplistic portraits of very complex socio-religious outlooks. Western renderings of Islam are principally and historically located in the Middle East. The legacy of Orientalist scholarship has produced a cached repository of constructions and images that portray Islam and Muslims as the “other” (Said, 1978). Abu-Lughod (1989:280) demarcates the “three central zones of theorizing within Middle East Anthropology: segmentation, the harem and Islam, and how they are actually “theoretical metonyms” by which an intricate, diverse and immense terrain is misunderstood. A gendered component of the Orientalist homogenous “othering” of Islam and Muslims, have painted Muslim women as oppressed, passive, submissive and weak, on the Western canvas.

The study of Islam in the West has become a search to minimize varied religious tradition into an ideal essence. Academia in the West formulates and defines the issue of “woman in /and Islam” firmly in the geographical arena and framework of the Middle East. Two principles are undergirded by this academic discourse; the legitimatizing of Middle Eastern forms of Islam as “authentic”, regardless of the fact that three quarters of Muslims are not Arabs, and situating the Arab world as the axis of the Muslim world in both popular and scholarly discourses. The authentication and validation of an Arabized Islam is mirrored in scholarly literature where copious books and articles are published addressing the “women and/ in Islam” question strictly in reference to the Middle East; academic literature devoted to south Asian Islam or south

Asian Muslim women are sparse This study seeks to redress this imbalance somewhat and bring South Asian Islam to the center from the periphery.

### Why South Asian Muslims?

This dissertation is concerned with South Asian Muslims, primarily of Bangladeshi origins. The question may be raised, why bother? Why study South Asian Muslims? There are already large numbers of studies on Muslims. South Asia comprises the largest Muslim communities in the world. Between them, the countries of Indonesia, Pakistan, India and Bangladesh have more Muslims than the entire Middle East combined. These four nations hold 49.7% of the world's total Muslim population. Bangladesh is the 4<sup>th</sup> largest Muslim country in the world. Even though the majority of Muslims are situated in Asia, Islam is inordinately linked both in the popular imagination and in academia with the Middle East and the Arab world (CIA, 2007).

The scholarly world by neglecting the study of South Asian Muslims, actively promotes this “natural” association of Islam and the Middle East. This is problematic, since it negates the authority and legitimacy of non-Arab Islam and Muslims. Additionally by focusing on Islam in the Middle East, researchers further solidify and entrench the popular belief that Islam is a monolith and is devoid of diversity. However, recently there has been a strong academic engagement with South East Asian Islam, with some interesting studies originating in Indonesia. However, as stated above there is a paucity of literature on South Asian Muslim women, and even less on South Asian Muslim women's engagement with religiosity. In examining South Asian Muslim women's religiosity, this dissertation contributes to the movement of South Asia and South Asian Muslims to a focal point in the discourse concerning Muslims and Islam.

South Asian Muslims make up the second largest Muslim group in the United States, after African American Muslims. They are the largest ethnic immigrant Muslim population, larger than the immigrant Arab Muslim peoples (Nimer, 2006). Ironically until 2001, the American psyche viewed all Muslims as “Arabs” and all South Asians as “Hindoos” (McCloud, 2006). Furthermore, national and religious lines are still eclipsed to the American gaze; Bangladeshis, Kashmiris, Indians and Pakistani’s all look like each other and thus are interchangeable; regardless of stated religious affiliation: Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jain, Muslim or Sikh (McCloud, 2006:56). Therefore, it is vital that South Asians and South Asian Muslims are able to participate in America, for their stories to join the American narrative without the layers of constructed images and stereotypes.

South Asian Muslims in the United Kingdom comprise its largest minority ethnic group. Colonial discourse, immigration and race legislations have colluded together to fold British Muslims and British Caribbeaeans under the common race classification of “Blacks” in British society (ONS, 2004). Britain’s Muslims make up the second largest Muslim Diaspora community in Western Europe, whilst the United States possesses the biggest South Asian community in North America. Hence it is of paramount importance to understand and conceptualize, how approximately fifty percent of this extensive transnational population approaches personal exegesis, empowerment, agency and understanding in relation to the Qur’an.

### Anthropology and Islam

Lukens-Bull presents the dilemma in which anthropologists find themselves in relations to Islam: He states that:

“The anthropological study of Islam is one that is plagued by problems of definition. What exactly are we studying? Local practices, universal texts and standards of practices, or something else entirely?” (Lukens-Bull, 1999).

Anthropologists conventionally have taken a non-literate approach towards Islam, and thus have not accessed the formative texts that inform the people they study. Ironically, according to John Bowen (1990) the main reason that anthropology as a discipline has not attempted a study of monotheistic religions, lies in their very acceptance of standard rituals and texts (Torah, Bible and Qur’an). Anthropology perceives these texts and rituals as encoding conformity, elimination of cultural specificity, and social structure and transcending specific locales. It is this very coherence according to Bowen that excludes the configuration of monotheism to traditional ethnographic models.

The established anthropological method of investigating Muslims and Islam has been the bifurcated schema of religions advocated by Robert Redfield (1960). The “great and little” traditions paradigm that Redfield clarified allowed anthropologists to rupture Islam from Muslims, and in many instances from urban centers and study Islam in exotic distant villages. Moreover, critics contend that in many ways Islam as a religion has been missing from the ethnographies concerning Muslims.

Abdul Hamid El-Zein posed an intriguing question in relation to Islam and anthropology “in the midst of this diversity of meaning, is there a single, real Islam? (1977:249). El –Zein himself believed in and theorized about many “Islams” rather than a monolithic Islam, Additionally, El-Zein postulated that an anthropological study of Muslims could be realized via the survey of varied interpretations of Islam. According to El-Zein, studies of Islams should:



“Analyze(s) the relations which produce it’s meaning. Beginning from this assumption, the system can be entered and explored in depth from any point, for there are no absolute discontinuities anywhere within it- there are no autonomous entities and each point within the system ultimately accessible from every other point. In this view there can be no fixed and wholly isolable function of meaning attributed to any basic unit of analysis, be it symbol, institution, or process, which does not impose an artificial order on the system from the outside. That is, the orders of the system and the nature of its entities are the same- the logic of the system is the content of the system in the sense that each term, each entity within the system, is the result of structural relations between others, and so on, neither beginning nor ending in any fixed, absolute point.”  
(El-Zein, 1977:251-2).

Anthropologist Talal Asad (1986) disagrees with El-Zein’s many Islams theory, arguing instead for a one Islam paradigm. Asad categorizes Islam as a discursive tradition that integrates and correlates itself to its founding texts, the Qur’an and *Ahadith*. He extrapolates that the anthropological study of Islam therefore should start from this assumption. I argue, as does Asad, that anthropologists have ignored the role of indigenous discourse in the Islamic tradition. Tradition is elucidated and utilized by Asad as an entity that:

“consists essentially of discourses that seek to instruct practioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice that, precisely because it is established, has a history. A tradition is conceptionally linked to a past (marking a formation of the tradition), a future (marking the strategy of survival of the tradition) and a present (marking the interconnection of the tradition with the social strata).”

(Asad, 1986: 14).

Critics of Asad such Marranci remain “unimpressed, if not skeptically suspicious of Asad’s “brave”, but too ideological, efforts to define “the idea of an anthropology of Islam” (Marranci, 2008: 42). I disagree with Marranci, who states that:

“The anthropology of Islam is not theology. This means going beyond the question of Islam Islams, and observing the dynamics of Muslim lives expressed through their ideological and rhetorical understanding of their surrounding (social, natural, virtual) environment”

(Marranci, 2008: 49).

Theology encodes and is encoded and impacts culture and peoples lives profoundly. I agree with Asad’s suggestion that theology as Muslims themselves define and perceive it, must be an integral component in anthropological surveys of Muslim cultures and peoples (Asad, 1986). I would counter that Marranci therefore again attempts to rapture Islam or Islams, from the indigenous discursive traditions inherent in the cultures that Muslims inhabit. Muslim peoples “Ideological and rhetorical understanding of their surrounding (social, natural, virtual) environment” is profoundly impacted and entangled with the discursive traditions of Islamic theology; Muslim cultures worldviews are impacted and molded by the Qur’an, the *ahadith*, and *tafsir*.

Marranci notes that:

“not all Muslims, though defining themselves as such, have a deep knowledge of the Qur’an or the hadiths.”  
(2008; 42).

Whilst this may be true, a lack of deep knowledge does not therefore signify that these Muslims lives are not in some respects influenced by the Qur’an and the *ahadith*. I believe that it is critical for an anthropologist to apprehend the theological Islamic discourse and use textual contents to the contexts of application or connotation. A lack

or unwillingness on the part of anthropology to engage with theology and its discourses, nullifies its claim to be holistic in its initial approach and subsequent analysis.

Varisco (2005) proclaims that the majority of anthropologists researching Muslims have not read the Qur'an, in English or in Arabic. He notes that:

“And yet it is not unusual to find illiterate Muslims who have memorized large portions of the Qur'an or are, in a sense walking oral texts of their faith...The anthropologist need not be a theologian, trained in exegetical method, but an awareness of the textual sources available for Muslims is clearly an advantage, at times a necessity, for analyzing how an eminently textualized faith plays out in the local community. “

(Varisco, 2005: 152).

It was only through her engagement with Islamic texts, that anthropologist Nadia Abu-Zahra's ethnography about rain rituals in Tunisia came into clear focus. She writes that:

“The fieldwork data would have been incomprehensible had I not consulted the Qur'an and the Arabic works of the commentators on the prophets tradition.”

Abu-Zahra, 1997:4)

There appears to be an apprehension in anthropology that by engaging Muslim theology, anthropologists may become native but Varisco declares that

“anthropologist is not likely to study Islamic theology in order to determine its spiritual truth, but it is almost nonsensical that an ethnographer would attempt to study Muslims without knowing seminal texts like the Qur'an, hadith collections and relevant legal texts.”

(Varisco, 2005:151).

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that underpins my research is French philosopher Mohammed Arkoun's (1994; 2002; 2006) conceptual classifications of the "thinkable, the unthinkable and the unthought" within Islamic reason and English anthropologist Victor Turner's theory of liminality and communitas (1967 and 1969). Utilizing Arnold Van Geenup's work on coming of age rituals, Turner defined the liminal stage as a place of "between and betwixt", a neither here nor there phase.

I hypothesize that Muslim transnational women are in a "between and betwixt place," where innovative contours of conceptions and meanings can give rise to disparate Qur'anic readings and give birth to an anti-structure to patriarchy, male domination and power. Diasporic Muslim women inhabit a liminal space, neither fully integrated in their new cultures nor no longer belonging entirely to their birth cultures. It is this very state of dislocation that should enable these women to develop the capacity to accept, think and articulate the previously "unthinkable" and "unthought" regarding Islam and the Qur'an. Consequently, I anticipate that Muslim women of the South Asian diaspora will be engaged in an everyday Qur'anic exegesis. However, whether this interpretation replicates an Islamic feminist paradigm or takes on a form that is free flowing and apart from academic discourse remains to be seen.

I contend that only an engaged personal exegesis, allows females to harness the transformative powers inherent within Islam and feminism, whereby their everyday consciousness is altered. Grassroots movements are more powerfully engaged in social change when their participants are armed with reconstructed self-knowledge; the

blossoming of empowerment “really begins in the mind, with the glimmers of a new consciousness which questions existing power relations and roles” (Batiwala, 1993:10). In conclusion, the foundation of power in Islam and in Muslim societies is the Qur’an and only by personally engaging in Qur’anic exegesis can Muslim women, both everyday and academic, wrest control over the source of power and challenge the existing patriarchal power relations.

### Methodology

The research perspective that has informed this investigation is that of a comparative ethnography; ethnography ensures that the inquiry has an etic (outsider’s) and an emic (insider’s) perspective. Ethnography allows for a contextualization of human behavior and institutions and thus aids in a richer analysis. Furthermore, ethnography opens up space for the details of religious ideology, authority and practices to be made clear. Additionally ethnography helps in particularizing the negotiation of a gendered agency and identity.

At this juncture I feel it may be profitable to quickly introduce myself, the researcher and my background. As a South Asian transnational woman, born in Bangladesh, I spent my formative years in the United Kingdom and have lived in the United States for over 15 years. In many ways my transnational position has allowed me the ability to stretch conceptionally, to question the Qur’an and orthodox Muslim doctrine. In respects to feminism, I would position myself as a strong feminist. However, although a feminist I cannot deny the impact that my religiosity has upon my feminist ideology.

The study communities are located in Reading, England and the Eastern Washington /Seattle, Washington region of the United States of America. I, the researcher selected these communities, since I am a group member via friendship ties or kinship links to both groups. The two populations mirror each other in some crucial ways: both are college towns, comprised of highly diverse, educated, and economically mobile ethnic minority communities.

While my sample consisted of both males and females of the wider Muslim diaspora, my core research participants were transnational Bangladeshi Muslim females. Initially my sample was partially composed of a “widening circles” approach – essentially where one participant recommends another. The research analysis initially consisted of structured interviews of 57 Muslim men and women. There were 15 males; 7 were non-Bangladeshi and 8 were Bangladeshis. The average age for the males was 35 years of age. There were 15 non-Bengali females and 30 Bangladeshi females. The average age for the females was 32 years of age. Educationally, all the women in the study were educated up to college level. All of the younger women had graduated from university and many were either working on advanced degrees, or were in professional employment. Additionally all the participants classified themselves as upper middle or middle class. I subsequently narrowed down ten Bangladeshi females in each community for the in-depth oral narratives.

Traditionally, anthropologists have been criticized for introducing bias towards perspectives from their own culture; however as a member of the research community, I was criticized with respect to my objectivity. I am aware of the specific biases that I bring to this inquiry but as a trained social scientist, I have endeavored to view and analyze the data as a committed professional. Furthermore, as an indigenous anthropologist I faced issues and questions regarding objectivity, access and ethical

limitations. The advantages of being a social scientist studying her own community were multiple; I already had tacit knowledge (deeply embedded and unspoken cultural beliefs) knowledge of transnational Bangladeshi Muslim culture. I had an organic understanding of the cultural mores and norms of my community without deep immersion and as I had mastered the Bengali language, I could understand and appreciate the nuances of the specialized lexicon of my culture. My insider identity helped me to bypass much of the background preparation that a non-indigenous ethnographer would need to do, the decipherment of embedded cultural beliefs and the building of human linkages and rapport the outsider needs to carry out field work.

While some anthropologists (Clifford: 1983; Geertz: 1988) have stressed the top down power relationship that exists between the anthropologist and the study community, other anthropologists (Kalir, 2006) have countered that an opposite relationship actually exists on the ground, where the subjects hold a great portion of power. In discussing her fieldwork Kalir comments that:

“Persuading them to cooperate with my research therefore depended crucially on my ability to gain their full trust. This in turn endowed my informants with considerable power to determine the nature of our mode of engagement. It also reduced my pre-designed method to secondary significance for the way in which my fieldwork unfolded. Put differently, conducting semi-structured interviews, tape-recording formal and informal conversations, taking photos, and being able to participate in regular as well as special events, were all dependent on my ability to generate trust and establish meaningful relationships with my informants. “

(Kalir, 2006:235)

My identity and position as a female member of the cultural unit encouraged women to express their thoughts and beliefs freely. Obviously there always existed the

possibility that informants would not, or could not, express negative thoughts or information pertaining to deleterious behavior that they felt needed to be concealed from the general public or me. I had been a functioning member of both communities for ten years before I initiated this study, thus I was fairly confident I could decipher any subterfuge or evasive tactics. Lastly my membership in the group opened up access to populations that other, non indigenous researchers may not have been able to access.

There were however, unforeseen consequences to analyzing my own society and culture. The communities I observed saw and situated me as one of them, since my group affiliation did not begin at the start of this project nor will it end at its conclusion. Thus I was a functioning engaged member, always had been and always would be and yet in my consciousness, my observant, concealed and recording self dissociated the active self on the sidelines. The act of focusing my gaze on a unit, whilst being part of it felt on many instances as if I were experiencing an out-of-body moment. There were numerous occasions when fully engaged in the movement, my mind and the insidious recorder self would halt my brain screaming “wait, this is important! , you need to file this away in your mental notebook so that it can be retrieved and made real in the physical notebook later. “ These instances of “stepping in and out of culture” were uncomfortably alienating for me; perceptions of betrayal pervaded my thoughts. Saudi Arabian Anthropologist Soraya Altorki describes a different encounter and sensibility in regards to being an indigenous anthropologist. She describes how:

The ordinary field situation reserved itself in my case. I became what may best be described as an observant participant. My primary duty was to participate. To observe became an incidental privilege”

(Altorki and El-Solh, 1988).



Additionally, as a full participating member of the community, I obviously needed to obey the taboos, obligations and cultural norms that my culture had established for me. Therefore, questions relating to maintaining a detached involvement, inability of “stepping and out of society “and the unsettling experience of being an insider/outsider and a subject/ object simultaneously was always in the foreground. As a result of my fieldwork experience, I do not fundamentally believe that there is necessarily a superiority of one category of anthropologist over another. The situation is more nuanced as each different type of anthropologist elicits, gathers and offers different facets of insight. In spite of, or maybe because of the unforeseen consequences associated with being an indigenous anthropologist, my research was simultaneously undergirded by a comprehensive emic (insiders) and etic (outsiders) perspectives of Bangladeshi Muslim diaspora culture.

I conducted preliminarily fieldwork in 2006, for which I had received institutional review board (IRB) authorization. The initial information collected helped to construct a detailed questionnaire and discussion guide. The results and readings of Islamic feminist exegesis were included in the final guide that was used for subsequent fieldwork (2006-2008). I conducted semi-structured, informal, friendly, conversational interviews that allowed the conversation to flow and meander in a manner that was congruent with the participant’s thoughts and processes. Each interviewee was allowed to speak uninterrupted, prompting occurring only when I needed to query issues that they themselves had raised. The interviews were conducted either in English or Bengali, taped in their entirety and transcribed by me.

Periodically the interviews broke off prematurely or finished before thoughts had been explained or elaborated upon; I usually came back and began the interview

from the same spot. Multiple and recurring interviews were conducted with my main interlocutors over the two-year period. Thus some questions were asked multiple times, intermittently eliciting very different answers, which were reflective of the numerous life changes that the women had undergone. The project and the women's narrative unfolded at an organic pace.

The interview locales were extremely varied; women's own homes, friend's houses, my residence, community centers, parks, mosques, coffee houses and religious gatherings. The comfort level of the interlocutors differed; my main interlocutors were interviewed and felt most relaxed in their own homes, their inner space.

There is a debate in anthropology regarding the nature and means of compensation that researchers should give their cultural consultants. I did not compensate any of my informants monetarily. The women allowed me to interview them based on my affiliation, location, and positionality in the community and on my personal rapport with them. If I had offered monetary compensation, it would have been culturally insulting to all involved. The gift giving was rather in the forms scripted by our shared cultural or religious norms, such as hospitality, food, friendship and social aid. My main interlocutors agreed to the interviews and gave me information on the basis of our preexistent links and relationships

Although I utilized data from participant observation frequently, the main segment of my fieldwork was concerned with eliciting oral life/ discursive/ spiritual narratives from the study participants. Oral accounts are especially helpful in understanding how Muslim women actually frame their Qur'anic interpretations. It is from these in-depth narratives that I hoped to discover if and what modes of exegesis Muslim Diaspora women are engaged in; how they understand their own agency and empowerment in relation to their personal Qur'anic exegesis, and what strategies each

woman used to navigate and negotiate the contours of personal and public spheres in light of their exegesis.

However, an important caveat regarding the oral narratives should be stressed; the Muslim women's stories in this study must be read as being filtered through my own perspective and writings and thus are not totally theirs but a hybridism of theirs and mine. The interpretations and conclusions that I eventually drew may not be the same, either conceptually or ideologically as the women intended to convey during their narrations. As Armitage and Gluck put it:

“There is no such thing as a transparent interview. The interaction of and positionality of both interviewer and narrator are fundamentally part of the process. “

(Armitage and Gluck, 2002).

Thus information flew multi-directionally during these encounters; I, the interviewer partially influenced the mode and content of the interviewee's narration, just as her orality influenced the questions I ultimately asked. The interview narrative and the play between the narrator and me, the interviewer, is therefore a dynamic site of meaning creation. Thus the fieldwork experience, ethnography, and oral narratives can and must be viewed as partial and situated explanations, which are demarked by inter-subjectivity and anatomies of interest.

As this was a multisite ethnography, my position as the researcher took on a more salient role. Marcus (1995) states that one of the complications inserted by a multisite ethnography is, the heightened significance of the researcher, on the study itself. This is a direct consequence of the researcher being the dominant source of linkages, across the different communities. Additionally, Marcus articulates that, in a

multisite ethnography, the researcher is always in the work. Thus they become by necessity, a more important interpreter of the work.

There are both strengths and weakness inherent in this multisite ethnography. The major drawback to a multisite approach is that I spent differing amounts of time in each locale. The most immediate result of this was that I interviewed and spent time with some interlocutors more than others. Therefore, it is a valid criticism to say that this research was not totally conducted with “a uniform set of fieldwork practices of the same intensity” (Marcus, 1995: 100). However, as the fieldwork for the study was executed over a two year period, one of its strengths is the door it affords in the dynamic metamorphosis of consciousness that occurred in some the participating women. Thus, a major strength of this research is its dynamic nature.

### Central Themes and Overview of Chapters

My dissertation is concerned with the nature of female engagement with Qur’anic exegesis. This research seeks to ascertain if, Muslim everyday women of the South Asian diaspora are engaged in Qur’anic exegesis. And if they are, the question then is: is the interpretation feminist? In the Western secular tradition, feminism has both an analytical and political understanding. It simultaneously offers both an analysis of a woman’s status across cultures and a formula for bettering that position for the “marginalized and oppressed” women (Mahmood, 2004). However, as glossed in this chapter, the bounded categories of feminist and feminism carries many varied and nuanced connotations in different cultural milieus. For many women, feminism is situated in a very intricate matrix of culture, race, sexuality, color, class, time and

history. Thus, what actually connotes feminist interpretation is open to interpretation itself.

This dissertation will endeavor to see if the women reflected in this research display an awareness vis-à-vis the Qur'an in the broad manner that Cooke and Badran (1990) delineated earlier. Thus, I am interested in discovering if the participants in the study displayed any movement in their understanding vis-à-vis the Qur'an. In analyzing the data, I asked each women's narratives the following questions: did the woman engage with the Qur'an: did she reveal an awareness that the Qur'an or its interpretation placed her in a disadvantaged status: did she display some form of rejection of enforced behaviors and thought: and then did she endeavor to interpret her own experiences and then to improve (even subtly) her position or life as a woman.

In Chapter 2, I set up the theoretical framework that that undergirds this dissertation: Mohammad Arkoun's thinkable, unthinkable and unthought, and Victor Turner's liminal field. I hypothesize that Muslim women of the South Asian diaspora are located in a liminal field. In order for women to consider new modes of thinking, vis-à-vis Muslim primary sources, they must be able to perceive and question the many interpretive treads that make up Qur'anic exegesis. Their liminal location should allow these women to question past and current Qur'anic exegesis. The use of Arkoun's theological program allows me as a researcher to uncover the historicity of the Qur'an and expose the construction of culture upon Qur'anic exegesis. Additionally, the theory of liminality as outlined by Victor Turner provides an analytical frame and vocabulary with which to examine, explain and understand this study.

The aim of Chapter 3 is to unpack the multiple webs of powers that Muslim women are embedded in, by adding race and class into the analysis of female Qur'anic interpretation. This section will compare and contrast the migration streams of South

Asians to the United States and the United Kingdom. Additionally, I will analyze the vastly different responses that have met each community in regards to race, religion and immigration. The question this chapter asks is: if people come from an initial shared background, then, will their interpretations of the Qur'an be the same?

Chapter 4 will survey official Qur'anic doctrine. The section will consider the ways that women in the study agree with and depart from Orthodoxy's view of Islamic doctrine. In exploring Qur'anic methodology and exegetes, chapter 5 attempts to broaden the interpretative boundaries of Islam by illustrating the diversity inherent in Qur'anic exegesis. This section will demonstrate the impact that culture has had on classical Qur'anic exegesis, and how cultural assumptions were replicated through set Qur'anic methodology. An examination of Qur'anic methodology is important, since the female academic Muslim scholars discussed in this dissertation firmly locate their Qur'anic exegesis within established Qur'anic exegetical practices. Furthermore, this portion of the dissertation will look at the Qur'anic exegetes of South Asia, who have been highly influential in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan.

Chapter 6 will focus on Islamic feminism and Qur'anic exegesis. I will flesh out the definition of Islamic feminism and the mode of its rapture with Western secular feminism. This section will develop portraits of the female Muslim scholars and elucidate their research. Furthermore, I will discuss the manner in which everyday Muslim women replicate or depart from the work of these feminist scholars. In my concluding chapter, I will analyze the interpretation of the everyday Muslim women. A concise condensation of the main points of dissertation will be presented, along with a number of specific conclusions.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

#### Jasmine and Sara

This chapter will explore and elucidate the theoretical orientations that form the premise of this dissertation; liminality and the *thinkable*, *unthinkable* and *unthought* in Islam. In the previous section I hypothesized that South Asian Muslim women of the diaspora are in a liminal field, which I suggest should allow them to question past and current traditional Islamic exegesis. I will endeavor to flesh out in what manner South Asian Muslim females in the West are in a liminal field, what are the exegetical consequences of liminality on and for these women and what characteristics of the liminal individual should propel these females to perhaps question existing exegesis of Islam. A caveat must be placed here as it is quite possible that some individuals could become more traditional and conservative as a possible defense against modernity or a new culture.

#### Jasmine

Jasmine is a medical student. Much of the interviews with her took place when she was an undergraduate student. Jasmine's parents came to the United States, when she was barely a year old. The eldest of her siblings, Jasmine equated herself to a trailblazer role in her family. Thus, any mistakes Jasmine made could easily be avoided

by her siblings. Mistakes for Jasmine meant navigating the shifting boundaries between being “American and being Bengali”. I asked her “did she mean Muslim Bengali,” and she surprised me by asking what I thought was a Bengali Muslim? Jasmine said that her parents regarded Bengali culture highly, but that Bengali culture was not entirely composed of Muslim culture or vice versa. She articulated that:

Do you think all the Muslims in Bangladesh are truly Muslims, whatever that means. In Bangladesh, it's easy to be [a] Muslim [because] everyone is the same as you. Everyone knows that Bangladesh is a Muslim country, so people don't [continually] ask “did you pray? Are you a Muslim? Do you eat *halal* (ritually slaughtered meat/permissible)? To be Muslim in Bangladesh, [you] follow the Bengali culture...you can eat anything in Bangladesh [because] it's all *halal* (permissible). Here, you have to stop and think, “Can I eat this?” ...Definitely, you [have] to *think about being and acting like a Muslim here*...I believe if I lived in Bangladesh, I [would] just follow my culture. ..Of course I would pray, but would I think about what I am saying and what I am doing? No...Here if you are Muslim you are doing it because you want to do it and [because] you are thinking about it. I don't think there's much difference between my parents and [names a Hindu Bengali family friend]. Here in the States, you have to mark out a difference... draw a line in the sand, what sets you apart from all the other people. [Islam] then become big. [You] have to choose, what's more important; your culture or your religion.

Jasmine is obviously questioning whether Bengali culture is more important than religion for her parents. Jasmine is struggling to disentangle Bengali culture from Islam. Jasmine clearly believes that Muslims in America are more authentic in their religiosity than Muslims in Bangladesh. The experience of living in a different culture allows Jasmine the ability to “think about being a Muslim”. Jasmine clearly articulates that Bengali American Muslims, as a direct result of living in a non majority Muslim



nation, consciously have to think and actively engage with their religion on a daily basis. Therefore, Jasmine believes that to be a Muslim in America is an active conscious choice.

When I first began the interviews, Jasmine articulated that she most definitely was an American but slowly, she began to question whether:

You can live in two worlds at the same time. There are times when [I] think [I] am living two lives. They are both good [but I am] not really all the way in any of them...at home I am very Bengali...but outside [I] am what? I remember going to school with Twinkies in my lunch box...*Amma* (mother) made me take lunch; in case I accidentally ate pork...I never ate paid school lunch... *Amma* (mother) asked what did Americans take in their lunch boxes and I told her Twinkies! So, for a long [time] I was the only kid that always brought Twinkies to school...everyone else had all these healthy lunches...Then, *Amma* (mother) would make home made fried chicken, popcorn shrimp and the *Bangla kabar* ( Bengali food)...I was not American then.

I [sometimes] don't feel comfortable in my body, in my skin [because] I can't figure out what I am. [My parents] tell me I am Bengali...[but] I am not totally that...No, I am not all American...[I am] a you know, mixed but not a comfortable mixed [it is ] uncomfortable to be me sometimes.

It is intriguing that food serves as the agent of identity in this narrative since Jasmine also utilizes food to explain her dislocation in a later narrative. Jasmine's narrative again illustrates the active conscious engagement of being a Muslim in America. Her mother packs Jasmine's lunch and makes her different, as a consequence of become aware that not all food is *halal* (allowable) in America. However, it is Jasmine herself, who further differentiates herself by bringing Twinkies everyday for lunch. It is interesting when her mother decides to make healthy Bengali lunches; Jasmine again views this act a negation of her Americanism.

Even though Jasmine wanted to experience and do “un-Bengali” things, she always ultimately did as her parents wished. However, it was oftentimes a struggle for Jasmine to go along with her parents wishes. Jasmine good naturedly, but somewhat ruefully commented that many of the things she had wanted to do as a child, which her parents had jettisoned as activities “not done in our culture”, her younger siblings were now enjoying.

Jasmine particularly wanted to go swimming. However since she would be showing her bare legs her parents had frowned on it. Even though Jasmine’s mother knew how to swim, having learnt in the village ponds in Bangladesh, she was not willing to let Jasmine learn. Jasmine got involved in a conversation about swimming with a young Muslim man. The young man articulated that it was better for a girl to drown, as a consequence of not knowing how to swim, and then dress immodestly in swimming clothes. Jasmine strongly disagreed. Much later, whilst in medical school, Jasmine booked a holiday in the Bahamas and sent me a picture of her swimming, in the blue waters.

Jasmine’s mother either wore saris or a shalwar kameez. I never saw her wear “American clothes” (a pant or shirt). Additionally, I never saw Jasmine wear a skirt. If she wore an actual skirt, it always had leggings underneath it. However, Jasmine loved Bengali clothes, especially the Shalwar kameez, which she wore to all the Bengali gatherings. She would surf the internet for what seemed like hours, looking at the latest fashions in India and Bangladesh. Although in one conversation, at the end of her senior year, Jasmine commented that she was looking forward to going to medical school, being alone and purchasing “lots and lots of skirts!” At the start of this research, Jasmine would have become conflicted if she had articulated beliefs that went against Bengali customs. Bengali culture is very communal orientated. People like being with

and expect to be with other people. Large groups are the norm. Yet, notice that Jasmine is eagerly anticipating escaping the crowds and being alone.

Traditionally, a Bengali girl only leaves the family house to get married. Jasmine's parents worried about the possibility of separation after college. For them, two ideologies were at loggerheads with Jasmine's desire to become a doctor. The fact that Jasmine would be a doctor made her parents extremely proud. However, the necessity of being alone thousands of miles away, without marriage dimmed the pleasure somewhat and added needless anxiety for her parents. As soon as her senior year approached, Jasmine's parents thoughts turned to the disappointment that their daughter was not yet married "to a good Bengali boy". And Jasmine was all too aware of this disappointment.

Jasmine's mother is an accomplished homemaker, who has passed her love of cooking on to her daughter. Cooking gave Jasmine a vehicle with which to be close to her mother. Moreover, Jasmine adored finding new recipes and experimenting with new techniques and ingredients. Still, Jasmine was aware that often her mother would become frustrated, since she deviated from the traditional recipes too much; there were too many non-Bengali ingredients in the dishes. These experimental dishes became emblematic for Jasmine of her parent's "not getting" who or what she was. The non-Bengali ingredients perfectly matched Jasmine's sensibilities, since "[I am] not all Bengali... [I am] like the *tarkaris* (dish) ... [I have] stuff in me that [does not] taste good for *khati* (pure) Bengalis".

When they first arrived in the United States neither of Jasmine's parents prayed regularly. However that changed slowly for Jasmine's father, who appeared to be very punctual in performing all the *ibadat* (rituals) of the faith. Jasmine's grandmother had come from Bangladesh to teach her grandchildren how to pray and read the Qur'an in

Arabic. Her father was very important to Jasmine and she was paradoxically very close yet distant from him. An engineer by profession, he wanted Jasmine to be accomplished. Whenever Jasmine finished an exam, I noticed that it was her father who she first contacted. And it was her father who appeared to impact her Qur'anic understanding. Below is a narrative from the early portion of the research.

I have read the Qur'an. I guess you can get hung up on all the small details but as my *Abba* (father) showed me it's the big picture that's important. You should be a good person, live your life morally, help others...I read it in English...not all the time, no.

Now contrast that narrative with the one below, which was given later in the same year:

I want to tell them, you made me this way... [It is in the] Qur'an. I read it. [It is] all about the big picture. They want me to read it and then marry a Bengali boy. [But] it does not say marry a Bengali boy... [Does] the Qur'an say to marry a Bengali? My *Abba* (father) and *Amma* (mom), [they] don't care if the guy is only Muslim in name only, as long as [he is] a Bengali...They pushed me to read the Qur'an [but] *it made me think*. They would be upset if I brought home a Muslim from Germany, or Ethiopia. [But] if I bring home a Bengali boy, that [does not] pray and drinks, that's O.K...The Qur'an says it [does not] want to make your life hard [but] they complicate it, make it hard.

What is striking about the above narrative by Jasmine is the challenge to parental authority that she seeks to contest, by using a cultural artifact, the Qur'an, that her Bengali parents also believe confers them authority over her. What is unfolding in the narrative is the shifting boundaries and understanding that Qur'an gives to various generations, and in different cultural milieus. Jasmine's parents urge her to read the Qur'an to solidify their Bengali culture. However Jasmine's engagement with and different interpretation of the Qur'an actually facilitate the loosening and reshaping of

those cultural bonds. A shared faith has a greater value to Jasmine than a seemingly shared cultural background.

### Arkoun's theory of Thinkable, Unthinkable and Unthought

In order to question prior classical exegesis individuals must be willing to consider new modes of thinking vis-à-vis Muslim primary sources. The historicity of the Qur'an, the construction of tradition and hegemonic and dissenting discourses within Islam can be excavated and viewed through the lens and framework of Mohammed Arkoun's notions of the *thinkable*, *unthinkable* and *unthought* in Islam. Arkoun's deconstructive program exposes the historicity of an immutable tradition and allows Muslims to perceive and question the multitudinous discursive trends that have existed and still exist within Islam, thereby allowing potential for fresh exegesis.

"...we are clearly referring to limits imposed by political and social pressures on the innovative and critical faculties of reason. A number of ideas, values, explanations, horizons of meaning, artistic creations, initiatives, institutions and ways of life are thereby discarded, rejected, ignored or doomed to failure by the long term historical evolution called tradition or "living tradition" according to dogmatic theological definitions. Voices are silenced, creative talents are neglected, marginalized or obliged to reproduce orthodox frameworks of expression, and established forms of aesthetics, currently received rules of judgment, evaluation, communication, transmission, teaching, relating to others."

(Arkoun, 2002: 11).

Applying a philosophical, suggestive and speculative framework Sorbonne Professor of philosophy Mohammed Arkoun articulates a critical analysis of Islamic reason that is contextually embedded in religious thought. Arkoun concentrates on the

hermeneutics of sacred texts that is writings that attempt to offer meaning and transcendence through the study of interpretation. His methodology is simultaneously anthropological, historical and philosophical, with promise for offering new and innovative Qur'anic approaches.

A common critique of Arkoun's methodology highlights its highly jargon laden terminology, which requires the reader to be conversant in multiple disciplines and that it is suggestive rather than definitive and lacking concrete systematization, rendering it problematic. Additionally Arkoun has been accused of elaborating, layering questions upon questions in his thesis without providing concrete answers. While I am in agreement that Arkoun's methodology requires an investigator to be extremely interdisciplinary in background and intellectual experience, I would hesitate to state that this devalues the analytical nature of his approach. Moreover, I do not presume that either Arkoun or his analytical framework intends to supply all the answers directly but rather focuses on opening up of critical vistas thereby enabling researchers to discover and formulate answers for themselves.

Another criticism leveled at Arkoun charges him with appropriating the *weltanschauung* and methodology of other French post-modernist philosophers such as Baudrillard, Derrida and Foucault (Haleber, 1991). However I find this line of exposition problematic for a variety of reasons; it should be expected that there would be a flow of similar concepts academic ideas, analytical frameworks, and outlook within French academia. Nonetheless whilst I do not dispute that there are elements of Arkoun's philosophy that do mirror Baudrillard, Derrida and Foucault, I postulate it seems likely that it is a direct result of a common and shared intellectual milieu.

Said (1997) postulated that in order to perpetuate hegemony the West asserts cultural copyright on non-western modes of thought. Hence, the West promulgates that Islamist/Islamic/Muslim discourses are merely a replication of concepts whose legitimate roots are exclusively located in the history of the West. Consequently when confronted with Muslim perspectives, the West articulates and counters that the Muslim is merely presenting Western ideas in Islamic lexicon and therefore embodies nothing more than Western concepts clothed in an Islamic idiom.

Arkoun's project aims to expose the construction of culture, most specifically Islamic culture and the metaphysical interconnections that exist between the "*thinkable*", the "*unthinkable*" and the "*unthought*". He demarcates the *thinkable* as all that is possible to think and express, whilst the *unthinkable* and *unthought* are what lies beyond the boundaries of the existing intellectual and linguistic schema. The *unthought* becomes the *unthinkable* when a culture maintains that the *thinkable* is the only imaginable form of expression and clearly differentiates it from what is *unthought*. Therefore the *unthinkable* really is whatever a specific culture refuses to contemplate. The *unthought* is the sum of the *unthinkable* that has been forgotten, rejected and marginalized. In order to reconsider Islamic Weltanschauung, Arkoun asserts that it is essential that the *thinkable*, *unthinkable*, *unthought* and the *unthought* in Islam be deconstructed. But that according to Arkoun does not mean that these are new thoughts but rather

"...do not mean that these topics are all unknown and have never been tackled in classical or contemporary Islamic thought...some problems have been intensively discussed at some time or another and have been rejected and relegated to the domain of the *unthinkable*."

(Arkoun, 2002:29).

The prime “*unthought*” in Islamic reason according to Arkoun is historicity and the “...accumulation of the *unthinkables* and *unthoughts* during the four centuries from the sixteenth century to the present” (Arkoun, 2002:17). Hence the objective of Arkoun’s project is to historicize that which he believes has been systematically dehistoricized: the Qur’an and other Muslim primary sources. (Arkoun, 2002; 2006).

Six building blocks construct Arkoun’s methodological scaffolding for a re-examination of Islamic reason; *societies of the Book/book, orthodoxy, dogmatic enclosure, Qur’anic fact/event, imaginaries* and *the thinkable, unthought* and *unthinkable*. He elucidates that the creation of history by revelation and the parallel orthodox exegesis can be seen and laid bare in and between the syntheses of these six domains. The *societies of the Book/book* are civilizations which are cast and formed by revelation, where the Word of God and God are one and the same; revelation as a meaning-giving event is a pivotal concept for the understanding of Islamic history. Hence the theological ideology of the Divine scripture (Book) is

“inseparable from the cultural, historical, and anthropological concept of book ...a material, civilizing artifact that permitted the shift from oral to written culture, illiteracy to literacy”

(Arkoun, 2002:114).

It is critical to note that the cognitive visualization understanding of revelation as a book was and still is a highly suggestive element in the formation of an Islamic imagination. In Arkoun’s framework, the *societies of the Book/book* notion analytically and functionally seeks to unveil the complex intricacy of the social, political, linguistic and cultural elements to the actuality of the sublimated Book (Arkoun, 2002).



*Imaginaries* are the limits of acceptance, the synthesis of images and imaginations vis-à-vis reality that are valid within in a certain social group inhabiting the same historical matrix. Consequently *imaginaries* are the understandings and construction of reality in a specific civilization; it operates analytically to deconstruct perceptions of reality. Arkoun classifies three categories of *imaginaries*: religious, social and the individual. The most dominant and prevalent *imaginari*e is religious, which is the realization of all articulated, and non articulated thoughts and faith axioms of faith that are held as truth. However such a definition is problematic as it then precludes the influence of critical reason on religious *imaginaries*. Social *imaginaries* are born from ideological discourses, the dynamic ensemble of thoughts, interpretation and cognizance of reality that is joined with set conations. Social *imaginaries* are a powerful and significant agent in group cohesion. Finally Arkoun introduces the individual *imaginaire*, which is the building block that creates the social *imaginaire*.

It is the Qur'an that endows the form, kinetic energy, and ethics for the *imaginaries*. Religious consciousness is thus molded by true historical events which are subsequently transmuted into paradigms. The genesis of the ideal in Islam is so remote, so distant that it is incongruent whether the notion of the perfect Muslim society parallels past reality or not. The exemplar of Islamic perfection in Medina additionally went through the interpretative process as apart of *orthodoxy* and thus the meaning given to the ideal of Medina has now become more real than reality itself.

*Qur'anic and Islamic fact/ event* reflects the separation between the linguistic revelatory event and the becoming and consolidation of the new religion and thus *Qur'anic and Islamic fact/ event* is the distance between the era of revelation shaped by the Prophetic oral discourse and the fixed, written, codified document. Hence *Qur'anic*

*fact/event* (oral revelation) is transformed by historical, social, political, and cultural processes into the *Islamic fact/event* (official written closed corpus).

*Dogmatic enclosure* is the

“totality of all the articles of faith, representations, tenets and themes which allow a system of beliefs and unbeliefs to operate freely without any competing action from inside or out”

(Arkoun, 2006:87).

According to Arkoun *dogmatic enclosure* demarcates the limits of Islamic reason, thought and discourse and cannot be divorced from *orthodoxy*. Thus all interpretative techniques and assumptions are constrained within *dogmatic enclosure*, with the classical exegesis

“... which made themselves authoritative over the historical development of the living tradition are used as orthodox instances of authority in order to reproduce the fixed inherited interpretations “

(Arkoun, 2006: 86).

Moreover it is *dogmatic enclosure* that is identified by Arkoun as the decisive break in Islamic reason; terminating the innovative period of active philosophical thought in the annals of Islamic reason.

It is *orthodoxy* and its analysis that as Arkoun makes clear is vital for a rethinking of Islamic theology and reason. *Orthodoxy* is outlined by *Arkoun* as a system of values, whose principal function is to ensure the protection, security and endurance of a group,

...becomes the legally constraining system of orthodox beliefs and non-beliefs fixed by theologians and jurists and enforced by judges...in its various versions defended by “sects” competing for the control of the state - is no more than the official religion, receiving increased support from the appointed ‘ulama”

(Arkoun, 2002:237).

*Orthodoxy* is an especially influential and significant element for growth and change of a society. Although *Orthodoxy* is consistently utilized within a theological context, Arkoun believes that it has never been considered in a historical perspective and that is a fundamental error. It is imperative that Scholars examine orthodoxy; the slow ideological, historical and cumulative process of selection, elimination and diffusion of ideas by the community which guarantees the political and hegemonic objectives of each historical group. *Orthodoxy's* importance is embodied and lies in its monopolizing power to interpret and define sacred texts; fixing the linkages of theology with judicial and ethical ideas and thus further deepening and tightening *dogmatic enclosure*. By asserting that it alone embodies the only *thinkable* and legitimate manifestation of religion, *orthodoxy* can actively classify and censure divergent views as heretical. Thus Arkoun concludes that it is *orthodoxy* that determines the sum of belief and non-belief and *imaginaires vis-à-vis* the Qur'an and Sunna by which Muslim communities came to understand and compose history.

The principal mechanism employed by orthodoxy to ensure unity and a coherence of tradition is *dogmatic enclosure* which is an effective tool since group members share synonymous parameters for perception and representative expression. The *thinkable* as embodied and delineated by *orthodoxy* adheres strictly to the interior of *dogmatic enclosure*, thus dissent in Islamic thought and history has evaporated into the sphere of the *unthought* and *unthinkable* (Arkoun, 2002).

Classical Qur'anic exegesis and exegetes decree(d) that the Qur'an encompasses all that can be thought and will ever be thought of, and thus classical commentators predicated that via their exegesis they had elucidated and conveyed all that is, was, and will be *thinkable*. If this, classical exegesis is the final static correct word on the Qur'an

*unthought* and *unthinkable* that I additionally think needs to be deconstructed along with historicity of Islamic primary sources, opened up, made *thinkable*; exposing the multiplicity of thought that compose(ed) Islamic reason and bringing to the surface the fabricated constructions and projections of a seemingly unbroken single strand of exegetical tradition within Islamic reason. Interestingly Arkoun infers that accepting the Qur'an to be the entirety of all that is *thinkable* propels modernity into the *unthought*, which permits advocates of traditionalism to legitimately view modernity as *unthinkable* (Arkoun, 1994; 2002). The *thinkable* molds the discourse and since *orthodoxy* demarcates what is *thinkable*, it is *orthodoxy* itself which determines the agenda and shapes the discourse.

Both procedurally and functionally Classical Qur'anic exegesis and exegetes were crucial in the genesis of the *thinkable* and *the Islamic fact/event*. Classical exegesis resulted in a framing of history that could be controlled and converged within the entrenched fetters of *orthodoxy*. The evolution of an official closed corpus and the historicity of the discourse surrounding it is part of the *unthought* in Islamic reason. Arkoun hypothesizes that a critical engagement with the *unthinkable* and *unthought* would open up fresh vistas, sparking mental inquiries, and allow the individual to transverse the entrenched orthodox milieus and taboos of *orthodoxy*. But how is this opening of space, the rupturing of cognitive bonds, pushing against *orthodoxy* and *dogmatic enclosure* achieved, if it is achieved at all in praxis?

### Liminality

The theory of liminality as expounded by British anthropologist Victor Turner provides an analytical frame and vocabulary with which to examine, explain and comprehend this personal praxis. Arnold Van Gennep (1909, 1960) argued that rites of

passage rituals comprised of a tripartite structure: separation, liminal period and re-assimilation. In this system the initiate is stripped of prior statuses and inducted into a liminal stage of transition before being re-assimilated and gaining their new status. In 1967 drawing heavily on Van Gennep's framework Victor Turner put forth his theory of liminality and the liminal field. Concentrating on the middle stage of passage, the transitional or liminal stage, Turner defined the liminal period as a place of "between and betwixt", a neither here nor there phase;

"liminality may be regarded as the Nay to all positive structural assertions, but as in some sense the source of them all, and more than that, as a realm of pure possibility where novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise"

(Turner, 1967:97). (My emphasis)

Turner, expanding the definition further, elucidated that in the liminal field mutually accepted differences between participants were frequently abandoned or de-emphasized, all group members were treated equally, a flattening out, deprivation of all differentiating features of social structure thereby constructing "a community or comity of comrades and not a structure of hierarchically arrayed positions" (Turner, 1967:100). *Communitas* comes into being "where structure is not" and is thus the unstructured, egalitarian creation of human interconnections that dislocation brings. Liminality as extrapolated by Turner exists in a dialectical system, and society itself is the result of this interplay throughout history. Nonetheless Turner's stress on the unlimited essence of comradeship within *communitas* has been critiqued by Webber who is concerned that Turner underappreciated the "conception and recognition of culture as political contestation: the battle over narrative power, who gets to (re)tell the story, and from which position" (Webber 1995:532).

Turner perceives liminality as a very visible expression of anti-structure in society thus one can argue that anti-structure is birthed by liminality. Anti-structure produces the zones in culture (outside, in between, and below) which are defined by the impermanent breakup and/or re-arrangement of the social fabric and thus, the differentiation of positions, specifically statuses and roles in hierarchical orders. Therefore anti-structure provides the necessary opposition in civilization since it functions as the creative cause of culture (Turner 1985 a: 171). Hence even as liminality is the antithesis of structure, dissipating hegemonic social architectures and is viewed as dangerous by orthodoxy (by those in charge of maintaining power forms), it is also the genesis of structure; liminality epitomizes the boundless possibilities from which social structure emerges. Consequently rites of passage can be translated as dynamic movement(s), from structure to anti-structure with a final return to structure.

Distinguishing features of the liminal state (and individuals) are openness, indeterminacy, ambiguity, structural invisibility, a freedom of movement that is not readily available to the non-liminal individual; ability to go back and forth traversing through areas, and a dangerous capacity to pollute to those that have not experienced the liminal stage (Turner, 1967:95). Liminal personae are

“...assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. Thus, liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon”

(Turner, 1991:95).

Furthermore, in some sense a liminal individual's concept of identity becomes blurred and diffused and an awareness of disorientation pervades the transitional person. Thus

liminality is an interval of metamorphosis where *conventional boundaries to self-understanding, thought and behavior are diminished* (Turner, 1967: My emphasis). Liminal individuals exist between social structures, temporarily fallen through the cracks, and it is in these cracks, in the interstices of social structure, that they are most aware of themselves.

This altered state of being brings forth *new perspectives and new consciousness; an expansion in the individuals abilities*. Hence liminality as extrapolated by Turner can be perceived as moments of transformation and reflexivity, enabling initiates to reflect critically on the formation of their societies and cultures. In “the realm of pure possibility” (Turner 1967:97) where the conventional can be displaced of its surety and prevailing perceptions transcended, there exists a potential for the dissolution of *thinkable, unthought and unthinkable*. Employing Turner’s theoretical framework of liminality enables me as a researcher to survey the Muslim crevices which “provide homes for anti-structural visions, thoughts and ultimately behaviors” (Turner, 1974:293), where socio-cultural order is (re) constituted.

### Sara

Sara is a Bengali American graduate student. She is not married and came to the United States on a scholarship. It was hard for her to make the trip, not only in a physical sense but on an emotional level. Her mother and father were initially very happy for her. However, she recounted how the night before her departure, her father sat her down and asked if she truly knew what she was doing? Did Sara realize that six years was a very long time? Sara’s father asked her to rethink her decision, as he thought she would be too old for marriage on her return. Sara was deeply shocked,

because she realized that the ones closest and dearest to her did not understand either her or her dreams at all. Sara bitterly explained that:

My brother's came [to America] to study. They were not married; nobody sat them down and asked them to give up their dreams...Do you know why? [Because] I am a woman! My family is so educated. I never dreamed...they think they are so liberal and people in [Bangladesh] can be too conservative... [But] he (her father) he really pierced me, pierced my soul. I started to think, maybe I [was] not as intelligent as I believed I was. I know I am intelligent. They made me doubt myself... [Because] I am a woman!

The first couple of years in America were extremely hard for Sara. Her single status made her

Nobody. I was and am a nobody. The women [the Bengali women] they are all married, [and] they do not know what to make of me. I came here without getting married... Come to study yes [but] you must be married first...why must I not give up what I want, just [because] my parents [did not] find the right man... The bachelors, [but] they are not really bachelors. They all have a girlfriend waiting back in Bangladesh. It hurts that *amar lok* (my people/ my countrymen) do not recognize me and I do not recognize them...to find comfort and home, I [have to] look outside [the Bengali community].

Sara's narrative illustrates the unintentional breaking of cultural bonds that can occur for women of the South Asian diaspora. This fracturing of tradition is equally difficult on all the individuals by placing herself in a "between and betwixt" position of coming to America, without a husband, has situated her in a location that few of her fellow countrymen or women are able to understand or approve. There were certainly some tensions that arose due to Sara's unmarried position. Many times, members of the Bengali community expressed that Sara was "not like us" or "she is a little bit different". Thus, any behavior or thought Sara expressed that the community did not agree with, were attributed to her outsider category. However, Sara was obviously not conclusively



an outsider. She clearly interacted with the community, had good friends within it and was part of the community in some respects. It was not only Sara that was “between and betwixt’ in this relationship but the community itself.

Sara began to interact with people outside the Bengali community. As a graduate student, she met and mixed with a diverse group of people. She had been so busy missing her parents and her country that Sara said that she did not have a chance to “get mad at them”. But as time wore on, Sara began to question expected behaviors and thoughts that her parents, her siblings, her friends and her culture asked of her. One her siblings came to visit. Sara talked of nothing else for weeks. The sibling came and went and Sara was sad again. Her sibling had seen changes in Sara that were not good; Sara had changed, did she not want to come home? Sara herself did not know how to articulate all that she felt. Just like Jasmine Sara talked of a needed distance between her family and her culture which would allow her clarity in her thoughts.

Sara had never gone to the mosque in Bangladesh. But now, attempting to find a home she began going. However, it was alienating for her. The strict separatism made her vocal. Sara stopped going. To find solace, Sara began reading the Qur’an. She hoped that it would not also betray her. In the Qur’an she found:

Peace. God [does not] tell me that I must be married to be intelligent...I had read it [in Bangladesh]. The *huzoor* (religious scholar) came and taught us. But it was reading without thinking. The right pronunciation, the right sounds...I read it in Bangla and in English. I try and make sense of the *surah* (chapter). But it can be difficult...I read the commentary to help me understand [the Qur’an] better. I sometimes [do not] agree with the comments. Men write them all anyway. . Yes, I believe I can interpret the Qur’an, why not? ...The Sheiks at al-Azhar, and the *Mulabes* maybe they spend more time studying it...they study it 70 times a day while I read it once a day but that [does not] give them more authority. It is their job to study it. But that [does not

mean] they are correct all the time. It's not just their Qur'an, [it is] everybody's Qur'an, everybody's Islam...If it's for eternity, then normal people must read it...understand it...for this time.

Sara highlights the issue of authority and legitimacy regarding interpretation. She, as well as all the other women in this study affirmed that anyone could interpret the Qur'an. Some interpretations may appear to have more authority but the women did not unwaveringly accept all interpretations. As Sara began to read the Qur'an more extensively, she took a bold step. The Qur'an states that men and women are equal before God. Customarily the mosques in America have two entrances, one for women and one for men. The men's entrance oftentimes is the main entrance, with the women's entrance being a back door. This was the case at Sara's mosque. Sara began walking in through the front door of the mosque, whenever she went.

Sara talked about lying awake at night, preparing herself to take the step. Many times she stopped short and just went through the back entrance. However, Sara did not feel brave enough to go against so much. Real courage she told me is walking through the front door of her mosque. The day she walked through, a young man stopped her, to let her know she had come the wrong way. Sara did not back down, but hurried past him. It is still hard for her but Sara expressed that she will never go through the back entrance again. "Why should I? God made me equal, but the guys at the *masjid* (mosque) want to put me down. Are they better than God?" Moreover Sara expressed that she would never have found the courage or strength to do this in Bangladesh.

#### Elaborations on Liminality

Mikhail Bakhtin also elaborated on liminality and was highly influential on formulations of later hybridity, especially of the post colonial variety. Bakhtin (1981:358) articulated two modes of hybridity: intentional and unintentional (organic). He regarded organic or unintentional hybridity as a crucial form in the historical evolution and existence of languages.

*“We may even say that language and languages change historically primarily by means of hybridization, by means of mixing of various languages”. In such situations of mixing... the mixture remains mute and opaque, never making use of conscious contrasts and oppositions...( yet) such consciousness hybrids have been at the same time profoundly productive historically: they are pregnant with potential for new world views, with new “internal forms” for perceiving the world”.*

(Bakhtin, 1981: 360: My emphasis)

Academically liminality has transformed into a problematic expression, with scholars debating its applicability, and definition, in connection to a variety of spatial-temporal metaphors (Bhaba, 1994; Kraidy. 2002; Shome, 1999. 2003). Liminality is widely deployed in postcolonial theory, where its proponents utilize it to salute a novel world of cultural fusion that is assumed to combine or restore distinct cultural and national boundaries. Hommi Bhaba’s corpus work on liminality within post colonial theory has been highly influential. Bhaba forwards the analogy of in-betweenness to articulate and buttress his definition of identity as ambiguous and extremely conditional:

*“The move away from singularities of “class’ or “gender” as primary conceptual and organizational categories has*

resulted in an awareness of the subject positions – of race, gender, generation, institutional location, geopolitical locale, sexual orientation – that inhabit any claim to identity in the modern world. What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or process that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These “in-between” spaces provide terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood - singular and communal – that initiate new signs of identity and innovative sites of coloration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself”

(Bhaba, 1994: 2).

Bhaba further pronounces that rigid identity classifications obscure the potential creative activity and location that exist beyond the broad categories of gender and race:

“Liminal space, in-between the designations of identity, becomes the process of symbolic interaction... prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities”

(Bhaba, 1994: 4).

Employing and stretching Turners concept of liminality, Bhaba redefines it as a “Third space” - a site of ambiguity that shuns binaries of colonist and colonized, powerful and powerless. The third space highlights the complexities and ambivalences inherent in depictions of Diasporas in and by the West (Bhaba, 1994). Additionally Bhaba’s third space incorporates both forms of Bakhtin's hybridity (unintentional and intentional), and as such the third space is:

“For me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the “third space’ which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority,

new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom...The process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation."

(Bhaba, 1990, in Jonathan Rutherford.)

Thus Bhaba appropriates liminality and hybridity to create the third space and invoke the instance or situation of imbalance, the edge where an entity becomes in a state of being an other. Both Bhaba and Turner accent the sited execution and the specific positioning of actors in their notions of third space and liminality.

However critics such as Loomba contend that Bhaba "generalizes and universalizes the colonial encounter the colonial subject seems to be universal and homogenous, unlinked to very specific contexts of race, class, or gender." (Loomba, 1998:178). Additionally other critiques of the post-colonial condition exhume the multiple power relations inherent within the subjects own indigenous communities such as religious and judicial hierarchies and caste systems. These commentators have remarked that for all its involvement with relations of power, the post-colonial lexicon does not seem to be engaged in or with hegemony at the very site of hybridity. This is an issue of which this ethnographic study is aware it is concerned with hegemony at the very point of liminality. A critique common to both hybridity and liminality is that both are predicated on the existence of a previously assumed pure prior cultures, which runs counter to contemporary anthropological visions of cultures as porous, adaptive, malleable, and dynamic and thus subject to continual change and borrowing (Ahmad,1995).

Shome (2003) moreover emphasizes the restrictions implicit in reinforcing spatial metaphors such as location-dislocation, center-margin or borders and in-

between-ness. Spatial metaphors are best deployed in understanding politics and cultural power as they highlight identity formulation and its interconnections to cultural production, such as exegesis (Shome, 2003). Space for Shome is a generative product of multiple dynamic linkages that is capable of altering material practices; it is an element of power that helps in the creation of social connections. Thus Shome perceives liminal expressions (hybridity, third space) which are associated with cultural studies and post colonial theory as representing the subject-self as a site of multiple crosscurrent streams of identity. Liminality in this reformulation operates as a recital of simultaneous difference and represents an allegory for the post-colonial state itself.

Thus for Shome it is the complex crosscurrents of embodiment and space, which allow for different forms of giving voice to those frequently rendered as voiceless. It is academia that according to Shome by its reliance on identity theorization, with its emphasis on spatial metaphors and cultural power relations is actually further propagating and formulating and reformulating difference. The only way to overcome this predicament is for academia to concentrate on a theorization of explicit issues of power vis-à-vis cultural production and not just in specifics of definite geopolitical orientation. Such traditional approaches epitomize the functioning structural and material operations of power in hegemonic discourses, and the social and political undertakings that stress containment and control (Shome, 2003).

While acknowledging Shome's critique of spatial-temporal metaphors, researchers such as Kraidy fail to comprehend any "credible substitute to characterize the dual forces of globalization and localization, cohesion and dispersion, disjuncture and mixture, that capture transnational and transcultural dialectics (Kraidy, 2002: 332). Thus for Kraidy, spatial –temporal metaphors are analytically valuable, as they moor research in very definitive geopolitical contexts, confining inquiries of the material

expressions of the production, replication, and conservation of power. In addition to questions regarding liminality/ hybridity perceived inelasticity and ambiguity, their analytical value has been called into question vis-à-vis their applicability to decipher the culture, politics and history of an area without comprehending the “how why and manner” of embodied beings inhabiting that space; how subjects actually live and write their own narratives. This is why ethnography and anthropology is so very important to the academic discourse on liminality, (hybridity and space) since their methodology and paradigm underscores the need to include and allow surveyed persons write their own narratives.

I want to move the discussion from liminality to exegesis; for me, exegesis is a ritual (Turner views exegesis as part of ritual) and it may be performed in an everyday mundane manner or a prescribed ceremonial fashion. Turner delineated ritual as

“...prescribed formal behavior for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to beliefs in mystical beings and powers regarded as the first and final causes of all effects”

(Turner, 1982: 79).

And

“Ritual is a “stereotyped sequence of activities involving gestures, words and objects, performed in a sequestered place”

(Turner, 1977: 183).

However in many respects Turner’s definition is inert. On the other hand Bobby Alexander stresses ritual’s dynamic and transformative components. He emphasizes that while ritual may open up the transcendent, its foundation is actually located in the mundane human sphere. Thus Alexander defines ritual as

“...most general and basic terms in a performance, planned or improvised, that effects a transition from everyday life to an alternative context within which everyday is transformed...rituals open up ordinary life to ultimate reality or some transcendent being or force in order to tap its transformative power.”

(Alexander, 1997:139)

Turner saw ritual, religious beliefs and symbols as all essentially affiliated; activities, events, gestures, objects, spatial units, relationships and words could all be symbols (Turner, 1967). Rituals are repositories of pregnant symbols, which are transformative for their power to act upon and change the persons involved in the ritual performance. Turner contended that the utilization of symbols in ritual indicated an attempt to “anticipate, even generate, and change” (Turner, 1980:163). According to Turner the empirical characteristics of dominant symbols are condensation, multivocality and polysemy.

Eade and Sallnow make an interesting observation regarding pilgrimage, which I feel, can be applied to exegesis. Pilgrimage (exegesis) is a dominion for opposing religious and secular discourses for and the orthodox co-option and the unorthodox retrieval of religious meaning, for contention between orthodoxies, sects and confessional groups- for pushes towards accord and communities, and for counter movements towards separateness and rupture (Eade and Sallnow, 1991). Thus ritual/exegesis can be viewed as a pluralistic model emphasizes the multiple constituencies inherent with a religion and their conflicting representatives.

So in what manner are South Asian Diaspora women in a liminal field, and how can one use the analytical categories of Turners’ liminality and Arkoun’s *thinkable, unthinkable and unthought* to explore whether South Asian Muslim women are engaged



in Qur'anic exegesis? I opine that these Muslim women are in a liminal field in the West by virtue of their very physical dislocation from their natal land and mental displacement from their ancestral home and their new residences. They are located in a trans-national space; an in-between-place and are dis-embedded from their national and cultural contexts and resettled in interstitial spaces; in a society but not of it. Applying the theory of liminality with its transformative and reflexaitive characteristics aims to see if Diaspora South Asian Muslim females could possibly be more open to Arkoun's historical deconstruction of tradition and the historicity of Islamic primary materials.

The case that I forward here is that the Qur'an is a dominant symbol in Islam; it has, as we will see in later chapters, condensation, multivocality and polysemy. I suggest that if liminality does have a *potential for new world views, with new "internal forms" for perceiving the world*", then women should be interpreting new forms of Islam. Additionally then any mode of exegesis performed by Diaspora South Asian Muslim females could be seen as a transformative ritual; the interpretative words and thoughts of these women would be just as symbolic as the written words of the Classical and traditional Islamic exegetes.

Arkoun's methodological framework allows one to read and deconstruct the hegemonic discourse of a "natural" inherent tradition and immutable theology by revealing the historical situatedness of orthodox/classical/correct Qur'anic exegesis. Additionally Arkoun's peeling away of the historical layers of Islamic reason provides crucial support for a restating of the nature and sources of Islamic authority and forming a foundation for a different Islamic exegesis. Ultimately Arkoun's methodology opens the way for a discourse on who is authorized to speak on behalf of Islam and Muslims.

## CHAPTER 3

### SOUTH ASIAN DIAPORIAS IN THE UNITED STATES AND THE UNITED KINGDOM

#### Bina, Poppy and Rokeya

Migrations of South Asian Muslims to the United States and United Kingdom have a long history. This chapter will introduce and flesh out South Asian Muslim Diaspora communities, both in the United States and the United Kingdom, and make clear that diverse legal approaches undertaken by the host nations in regards to race and religion have profoundly, affected the nature and configuration of each transnational community. I will examine the migratory patterns of Bangladeshi females to the United Kingdom and the United States, and how these migration streams underpin notions of integration, assimilation, segregation, and community for transnational South Asian Muslim women. Furthermore, I will argue that in contrast to American law, British Law has facilitated a racialization of Islam. This chapter will endeavor to lay bare the linkages that exist among race, culture, class, religion and immigration policies both in the United States and the United Kingdom.

#### Poppy

Poppy is a married woman, with one son, in her late sixties. She has a sister who lives in the United States and two brothers' still living in Bangladesh. Both of her parents are now deceased. Poppy and her husband, a doctor immigrated to the

United Kingdom in the mid sixties. Poppy's husband came as a result of the mass shortage of physicians in Britain. Poppy did not join her husband until a full year and a half after his arrival. A large gregarious woman, with an acid tongue, Poppy spoke of the cold and loneliness that met her in Britain. Her husband initially worked for a London hospital, and they lived in a rental home. It was cold, damp, small and enclosed. It gave Poppy claustrophobia.

Poppy did not have any children yet, so she made herself go out and explore. She wanted to see the "famous *belat*" (Britain). Having graduated from college, Poppy knew how to speak English. It was not fluent, but it allowed her to communicate. Poppy spoke to everyone that came by, the milkman, the postman, and the paperboy. She spoke that *belat* (Britain) was

It was lonely...you can be lonely in the middle of London. I was so excited to come to *belat* (Britain). I tried to speak to everyone, to improve my English and just to know someone besides [her husband]. Sometimes, they would talk back politely. You know the English; they will be *balough* (good) to your face but inside. I know inside they were thinking "why are you speaking to us, we are English, you are *kalo* (black)...Even the milk man.

I would write letters and as soon as I heard the *chiti* (letter) come through the hole, I was already reading it. It took so long for the *chitis* (letters) to come...I wrote so much then. I wrote to my sisters, my mother...school friends, anybody. The letters brought the smells and the people of *amar desh* (my home/ my country) to this *thanda thanda desh* (cold, cold country). Now, we just pick up the phone.

Polly did not work. Later, when her son was in middle school she began working as a civil servant. After her son's birth, she was busy raising him. She sang Bengali songs, songs that her mother had sung to her as a child. Poppy missed her

family tremendously but there were times she was too tired to miss them. As Poppy came from an upper middle class family, her family always had domestic help. Thus, Poppy had not cooked or kept house much in Bangladesh. Letters came bearing instructions for cooking familiar dishes with unfamiliar ingredients. Poppy still feels that her cooking could still improve.

Slowly, Poppy and her family began making friends with other Bengali doctors and their families. Some of them she genuinely liked and others became friends by necessity, filling in for the family she left behind. Poppy and her husband would go shopping on the weekends to the Sylheti districts in London. The shops had all the

*Chaal* (rice) and *dhal* (lentils). I was jealous when I went there. The people in the shops were all talking in Sylheti, just like they never had left home. I was living in hospital quarters, so I only knew one other Bengali family...yes they were fine...there was not many choices of friends, you had to take whom you got. ..Once I was in Marks and Spencers (a British chain store) and I heard *Bangla kautha* (Bengali word, someone speaking Bangla). ..I ran after them in the street and invited them for tea.

A very practical minded woman, Poppy's house is very much a reflection of her. It is decorated in a very utilitarian manner. There are no pictures or any reproductions of any *ayats* (verses of the Qur'an) on the walls, no flowers on the tables and no chintz furniture. She commented that she never brought anything much to decorate the house with as she always thought she would return to Bangladesh. However there are pens with pharmaceutical logos all over the house. Recently however, pictures of her grandson, in glittery frames have popped up around her house.

I never saw Poppy rush to pray or make a big show of her religiosity. Her husband on the other hand was a different matter. He is very prompt in completing all the prescribed prayers in a timely fashion. Even though Poppy was very close to her son, during his childhood more so than her husband, she now has a very different relationship with him. After getting married Poppy's son started to "listen only to his wife". In Poppy's estimation, the only time her son calls is to ask for money. It hurts her very much, even though she brushes it off. Poppy tried to explain her hurt. She asked:

What can I do? It's the way...you give everything for your child and then what? I want him to be happy [but] do I not get some happiness too? We stayed in England to give him everything...I do not feel this is home [but] when I go back to [Bangladesh] I do not feel at home there. What to do? ...I have lived in England longer than I ever [lived] in Bangladesh...am I English? Who knows? My passport says I am.

Poppy had always believed in God, but she had not practiced much of the *ibadat* (rituals) or felt that she needed to. Her husband had shown their son to learn how to pray. And on *Eid* (Muslim religious holiday) both her son and her husband had gone to the mosque if it had been a weekend. Poppy indicated that living in England, where only Christian holidays were given days off work made it difficult to create the air of festive anticipation. Poppy always expected to live with her son and his wife. According to Poppy, Even though her son had grown up in Britain, he knew the Bengali culture. However, the difficult situation with her daughter in law made it impossible for her visit, let alone live in her son's house.

I have stated reading the Qur'an more; I do not have much else to do. I talk on the phone all the time, to Bangladesh,

America, and people in England. But I get tried. I read it. ..Maybe I am looking for answers why God gave me such a daughter in law. Or maybe I am old and I need to see what will be on the other side...It makes me sad that I let the *Mulabes* (religious class) push me away from it for so long...half of them [cannot] read Arabic properly...always telling that women have low *aql* (intelligence)...they tell men that the Qur'an says to beat women if his wife [does not] take a bath before her *namaz* (prayers)...or if she [does not] pray...why...if she goes to hell, [he is] not responsible for her...[do not] ask your husband for your *meher* (payment to bride on marriage) ...why, the Qur'an says we should have it. They are so wicked! The *Mulabes* (religious class) think [everything] is a woman's fault

### Diasporas

Firstly I want to clarify how this dissertation will utilize the term South Asian Muslim Diaspora. Academically "Diaspora" is understood to have three specific forms of meanings, a social, a conscious, and a cultural production mode (Vertovec, 1999). The social form of diaspora places the stress on a specific group, which is characterized by their relationship to each other, despite being in a state of dispersal. The Consciousness model emphasizes a state of mind, a sense of identity and the awareness and influence of multi-locality on diasporic individuals and communities. Lastly Diaspora as a mode of cultural production is generally intertwined within analysis of globalization (Vertovec, 1999).

William Safran (1991) stated that 'Diaspora' as a concept refers to those communities that commonly encompass some or all of the following characteristics: the initial community has dispersed to two or more countries from a common homeland; they are linked together from their diverse regional locations by a shared collective memory, a remembrance or myth regarding their homeland; a supposition that the host

nations and communities will not fully accept or integrate them, which in turn propels diasporas to establish their own autonomous cultural and social needs; there is a persistent mythical narrative of the return to their ancestral homeland, which forms the impetus for the continued emotional and monetary support Diasporas provide for the maintenance or restoration of the shared homeland, and consequently it is this very shared consciousness and solidarity that enables diasporas to perpetuate these activities (Safran,1991:83-4). Safran's definition of Diaspora neatly falls within the realm of the social diaspora.

However critics such as Fazal and Tsagarousianou (2002) find Safran's definition of Diaspora limiting and problematic, arguing that such a formulation renders Diasporas to be merely sub-categories of an ethnic group or nation. Fazal and Tsagarousianou bring notions of home into the Diaspora discourse by elucidating that diasporic ideologies of home are linked to a multiplicity of locations through geographical and cultural boundaries.

“Within the frame of contemporary Diasporas, the notions of ‘home’ and when a location becomes home are therefore linked with the issues related to inclusion or exclusion which tends to be subjectively experienced depending upon the circumstances. When does a location become a home? How can one distinguish between ‘feeling at home and staking a claim to a place as one’s own?”

(Fazal and Tsagarousianou 2002, 11-12)

Cohen (1997) attempts to broaden the definition of Diaspora to encompass a wider scope of phenomena, and in doing so emphasizes the transnational elements of diasporas. He stresses that identification with a diaspora functions to traverse the divide between the local and the global. Thus, Cohen's formulation of “Diaspora

“accommodates people who have dispersed either of their own volition or as a result of persecution, aggression, and extreme hardship. Cohen additionally stipulates that “Diaspora” must factor in an obligatory time span before any community may be characterized as diasporic. Not only do Diasporas articulate collective identities in their place of encampment vis-à-vis their motherlands, but according to Cohen they also share a parallel identity with segments of the same diaspora community in other nations.

To better understand and gain an appreciation of diasporas and diasporic individuals perceptions of off-balanced attachments; of being concurrently ‘home away from home’ or ‘here and there’, or American, British and something else, Mandaville (2004) advocates an analysis and acknowledgement of the transnational ‘routes’ as well as ‘roots’ of all diasporas. Hall’s (1990) explication of diaspora offers critical insights regarding Diasporas, ethnicity and identity:

“[D]iaspora does not refer us to those scattered tribes whose identity can only be secured in relation to some sacred homeland to which they must at all costs return, even if it means pushing other peoples into the sea. This is the old, the imperializing, and the hegemonizing form of ‘ethnicity.’... The diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of identity which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference.

(Hall, 1990: 235)



Mandaville stresses that diasporas are not “given communities” (Mandaville, 2001: 169); but rather they are emblematic more of Benedict Anderson’s (1991) “imagined communities” definition. Thus the notion of diaspora itself is not a static term or form, and is thus in a state of perpetual flux. In addition to the dynamic elements of Diasporas, Mandaville (2001) highlights the importance of the intricate mechanisms of negotiation and the constant reincarnation and regenerative dispositions of diasporic communities’:

“The estrangement of a community in diaspora – its separation from the ‘natural’ setting of the homeland – often leads to a particularly intense search for and negotiation of identity: gone are many traditional anchor points of culture; conventional hierarchies of authority can fragment. In short, the condition of diaspora is one in which the multiplicity of identity and community is a key dynamic. Debates about the meanings and boundaries of affiliation are hence a defining characteristic of the diaspora community”

(Mandaville: 2001, 172).

Appadurai & Breckenridge (1988) consider globalization as the multi-national circulation of cultural objects, images and meanings that directly results in a kaleidoscopic mechanism of creolisation, reciprocal transmissions and influences, fresh contestations, bargains, and continual metamorphosis. It is in this milieu, that they then interrupt Diaspora as production, and reproduction of transnational social and cultural phenomena.

In the context of this dissertation I will define and apply the appellation South Asian Muslim Diaspora to specify Muslims who have or whose ancestors have originated in the Indian Sub-Continent of Asia; the modern countries of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka and who now reside in other

nations. Furthermore, their social, economic and political networks and relationships traverse the borders' of multiple nation states, such as Canada, Great Britain and the United States.

However, there is a caveat regarding the usage of the appellation "immigrant"; in many of the above states, the South Asian Muslim diaspora contains multiple generations, therefore the term "immigrant" has become highly politicized and increasingly debatable. In British academia the term "immigrant" is no longer prevalent and instead the expressions ethnic minority or BritAsian has become de rigueur (Abbas, 2005). Nonetheless I have used the idiom "immigrant" and will continue to do so as this dissertation is embedded in an American academic tradition.

### Migration Streams

An examination of the migration streams of South Asian Muslims to both the United Kingdom and the United States demonstrate marked points of divergence, which when combined with the legal responses of each nation have created very different immigrant experiences, identities and communities. Migration of South Asian Muslim females and specifically Bangladeshi females to both countries have followed a very scripted route; Bangladeshi females entered Great Britain as "wives" and "daughters", as "dependents", arriving in their host country, months, even years after their male relative (Leonard, 1993; 2003; Turner-Rahman, 2009). With respect to the life transforming act of migration, Bangladeshi females were not the prime decision making agents (Turner-Rahman, 2009).

Lone female emigration to the United Kingdom was almost non-existent; only in the immigration of the South Asian community of East African is there an instance

where both sexes arrived simultaneously to Great Britain (Bhachu, 1985). Migration to the United States by Bangladeshi females followed an analogous pattern to their British counterparts with two significant points of departure; there were instances of individual female immigrants who were pursuing postgraduate degrees in professional fields and the layover for female immigrants before joining their husbands and fathers was of a relatively short duration (Leonard, 1999; 2003; Turner-Rahman, 2009) Thus Bangladeshi female immigrants came as “wives”, “daughters” and “scholars” to America.

Three demographics groups have historically dominated the composition of British Muslim South Asian immigrants; unskilled laborers, highly skilled professionals (physicians and surgeons), and former blue collar workers and businessmen from the East African-Asian expulsion, who as a direct result of lack of educational and institutional access became shopkeepers, service workers, and businessmen (Bhachu, 1985; Abbas, 2005; Fisher, Lahiri and Thandi, 2007). A considerable majority of these immigrants entered Great Britain from the late 1940's to early 1980's.

In contrast, the population of South Asian Muslim immigrants to the United States reveals a strikingly different picture: approximately 90% of South Asian immigrants to America arrived post 1965, entering as university students pursuing higher degrees or as very highly skilled professionals (doctors, engineers, computer specialists and nurses) employed in their area of expertise (Smith, 1999; Leonard, 2003; Nimer, 2002). Therefore, from one perspective an argument can be forwarded that the United States received highly skilled and potentially highly skilled professional workers, whilst the United Kingdom acquired a largely unskilled and a business class of workers from South Asia.

## Bina

Bina is a thirty-four year old Bangladeshi American. The youngest of six siblings, Bina married her husband, an engineer, in Bangladesh. It was an arranged marriage. Bina joined her husband in the United States four months after he immigrated there. A year later Bina had the first child of her four children. When I first met Bina, she was a stay at home mother. However, towards the end of my research period she had gone back to school to pursue her master's degree.

Bina liked learning but that was not why she decided to go back to school. Supporting a family on one breadwinner's salary was extremely difficult and she articulated that she did not leave her family behind, in Bangladesh to eke out a living here in America. Moreover, she mentioned numerous times that as God had given her a good brain, she should make use of it. Bina's husband did not want her to work outside the home. He verbalized that the children and their home life would needlessly suffer. However, Bina overrode him. She used examples of family friends who also wore the hijab and worked, to advance her position. Nonetheless, Bina made sure that she prepared many of the week's meals in advance, and did not ask her spouse for too much help in the domestic arena. She clearly stated that she did not want her husband to find any excuse in order to attempt to make her stay at home.

Bina is actively involved with the Mosque in her community. However, only two other Bengali Americans attend the mosque, which has necessitated Bina befriending women from other countries. She expressed frustration that the Bengali community as a

whole is not more involved with mosque. Bina is very punctual regarding all of her *ibadat* (rituals of Islam). Bina informed me that since coming to America, she has never made any of her prayers late. This was clearly a source of pride to her. Many times community gatherings for lunch or dinner would start at strange times, such as a lunch program starting at 2: pm, so Bina, who was usually organizing the event, could complete all her prescribed prayers on time.

A friendly woman, Bina at first appeared quite and shy but that is usually in the company of men or people she does not know. However, with friends and especially in an all female group she was always extremely extroverted. A fierce organizer, she was the organizational force behind many Bengali gatherings. Bina loved big crowds. It made her feel at home. Bina also wears the Hijab. In one of our first interviews she stated that in her natal home:

Everyone [all the women] at home wore it. No one forced us to wear it, but I knew that if I did argue, then nothing would come of it. I did not [force the issue] I knew that was not something that would be allowed [taking off the hijab] . . . Anyway; I studied the *surah* (chapter of the Qur'an) where it talks about the hijab. So it is required.

This is an interesting narrative. Initially, Bina has no choice but to wear the Hijab. However, she attempts to justify wearing it by studying the *surah* (chapter of the Qur'an) and discovering verification for it. The narrative illustrates how Bina generally approaches life. She is pragmatic and practical. Bina realizes that the hijab is an issue that her conservative family will not move from and thus she accepts the inevitable. That is not to say that Bina capitulates in all decisions affecting her, but she clearly does so on issues that she knows she cannot win.

However two years later, she expressed a vastly different opinion. Bina wondered how her daughter would react to wearing the hijab. If it was left up to her, Bina indicated that she would let the child go as long as possible without wearing it. That is not to say that she is advocating not wearing the hijab. But Bina wanted to reason with her daughter, show her what *surah* (chapter) in the Qur'an mandates that females need to cover. Bina expressed frustration that her spouse did not see the situation the same way. She stated many times that he lived on another world where the practicalities of life did not touch him. Although, she indicated that initially she was willing to go along with her spouse's desire to make her daughter wear the hijab, Bina wondered whether the child would end up covering for her parents in their presence but take the hijab off at school. Bina articulated her daughter's culture was a very different one than that of her or her husbands. And in her daughter's world, Bina stated that her daughter would have a choice of whether she wore the hijab or not. Poignantly, Bina felt very sorry for her children, who were caught between "two worlds".

Bina herself talked of having one foot in Bangladesh and the other in the United States. Bina believed that she no longer fit in wholly within Bengali culture and especially not in the manner, which her family interpreted it. Bina often spoke longingly of Bangladesh. When I asked her what she missed about it, she replied "my family". She did not miss the sights or the sounds of Bangladesh, like Poppy. Bina just missed her family. However, she indicated that she talked to her family almost daily on the phone. Sometimes they called her sometimes she them. Many Bengalis miss it too much was Bina's take on the matter. She expressed that God had placed her in the United States so obviously that is where he wanted her to be. According to Bina, those people

that spoke of the difficulty of being Muslim in a foreign land were fooling themselves.

She said

Lots of people say, "I [can not] find *halal* meat, well eat fish. I do. It will not kill you...It is easier to be a Muslim here, I mean a real Muslim. Yes, you have to think about it...when I came to *Amerika* (America) I found my religion anew. I saw for the first time, the beauty in it...*Amma* (mom) thinks I am *pagol* (mad) [but] when she tells me what my sisters-in-laws are wearing, a new sari every month and the gold...I do not miss it. They are all caught up in it...they [can not] step out and see that its all our Bengali culture [but] that [does not] mean it is Islam...yes of course Bengali culture can be Muslim culture [but] you have to understand what is and what [is not] and sort that bit out.

And in a later conversation, after attending a lecture by a guest speaker, Bina articulated that being away from Bangladesh allowed her to see her faith differently. The speaker, a scholar from Egypt had told the audience t "I went to an Islamic country and I found Islam, but I went to the United States and I found Muslims." Bina was surprised, she said

I was...what are you talking about...then I understood. He found Islam because he found the prayer, the call for prayer; he saw more mosques, more modest dress on women and on men and more modest public behaviors. The essence [of] what is Islam. Here you have to think ...about [the] spiritual and what are you supposed to be, as a Muslim...I [do not] want to generalize because I don't have the right to judge people...I don't know much about Islam, what I know is the way I was brought up. Maybe [that is] not the true way but I think ...the religion gets too tied to the culture of the Arabs...they are not open. ..They're out of this time...not catching up with this time.

### Bangladeshi Americans

The economic indicators for South Asians as a group have displayed a downward trend from the 1990 to the 2000 United States census. A two-fold explanation exists for this phenomenon; both elements of which are directly linked to inherent characteristics of immigration legislation in the United States. One major aspect of immigration policy in the United States is premised on family reunification. Thus it is not unexpected that the qualifications of immigrants have changed over the decade. Additionally a minor change in immigration legislation, which will be addressed below, has approved the creation of an immigration lottery, thus enabling many immigrants with lower levels of education an opportunity to come to the United States (Haddad and Smith, 2006).

In comparison to their population base in the United States, American South Asian including Bangladeshi Americans of both sexes currently are very well represented in high salaried professional sectors: technology, medicine (4% of all medical doctors in the United States are South Asian) and business (Nimer, 2002; Leonard, 2003). They have very high household incomes, are extremely well educated, considered to be middle to upper middle class, are classified racially as Caucasian or “white,” (Leonard, 2003) (although other researchers such as Haddad and Turner-Rahman would dispute this) and have low incarceration rates. Like other South Asians, Bangladeshi Americans are one of the most integrated (least residentially segregated from Euro Americans) of all immigrant communities. Asian Americans, in the United States are generally viewed as a model minority: their culture highlighting a strong work ethic, respect for elders and high valuation of family (Mishra and Mohapatra, 2002; Nimer, 2002; Leonard, 2003).



Arriving predominantly from the four modern nation states of Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, American South Asian Muslims represent a dozen ethnic groups. Thus although they may first appear to be homogeneous, the South Asian American population is actually very heterogeneous. As a category they constitute the largest (26.4%) ethnic community of immigrant Muslims (McCloud, 2006). Current estimates regarding the total Muslim population of the United States is vague and extremely difficult to quantify. A large part of this quandary stems from the direct consequence of legislation forbidding the United States Bureau of the Census from compiling religious data. A supplementary issue is the lack of definite data for American born converts to Islam, and the absence of a concrete estimation of the numbers of African American Muslims currently in the United States (Dannin, 1995). Therefore, establishing definitive demographical and statistical information on the United States Muslim population has largely become a matter of guesswork (Dannin, 1995; Nimer, 2002; McCloud, 2006; Haddad, Smith and Moore, 2006).

Numerous statistical studies have been premised on attendances at United States mosques. However critics of this approach point out that only 20 % of American Muslims actually attend Mosques regularly, and that the majority of regular attendees are males; this in turn makes these figures highly suspect (Nimer, 2002; Haddad, 2004). Jasmine, discusses the mosque environment below:

“My parents, they started going to the mosque. They wanted us to [become familiar with] Islamic culture...but there was only a handful of Bangladeshi families that went [to the mosque]. It’s shocking. The Arabs...it’s all about separation. Obviously they’ve been doing that their whole life so... but where I come from [we do not segregate] ...I asked why do you guys do that, and they [replied] don’t you and your family...NO, we all sit, and talk together, do everything together. My uncles, my aunts, my sisters [Cousins] [and] their husbands, we’ll are all together- why would you separate us. My culture is all about family...they don’t see it

as weird or different [because] that's how they've been brought up. I've been brought up differently. They stopped going [her parents]. There's a lot of social politics going on, if you do this...or wear that you upset someone..."

Bina, who is a regular mosque attendant, spoke about the differences of going to the mosque in the United States and in Bangladesh. Notice Bina's usages of the *hadith* (narratives and praxis of Muhammad) in her explanation of why she never went to the mosque in Bangladesh.

*Deshee* [in our country] there is no system [to go to the mosque]. There is a *hadith* (narratives and praxis of Muhammad) that if there is no problem for you to go to and fro from the *masjid* (mosque), and then you [should] go. Here, I don't have any problems. Here, I can take my car. [In Bangladesh] travelling in a rickshaw, what *beheer, tash tasi, kada*, [crowds, jostling, and mud]. So its just better to do *namaz* (prayer) at home isn't it. Here, because of the opportunity, that's why I am going [to the mosque]. *Deshee athu dokar oh nai* (in our country there no need). The [main] reason why [I] go to the *masjid* (mosque) is because [I] am getting [a] social life there, Na [no]? There are a lot of families together at the *masjid* (mosque), besides [their] mom and dad [our children] are not seeing anyone in a Muslim sphere] ... the children see [it is] time to read *namaz* (prayer). That's it, [reason for going to the mosque] that culture, the social thing is happening there instead of at home. At the *masjid* [the children] understand how other [Muslim] mothers are, how to do *namaz* (prayer). That's why it's important... the culture, it [is] social. Because we are not with our relatives [here in America]. But [you should go the mosque] only if you have the time. If you don't, what are you going to do? ...All the Bengali here, everyone is busy. It's not like *deshi* (home).

Mala a Bengali British woman in her late thirties discusses British mosques.

Growing up in the eighties, I never went to a mosque. The only reason I went was to learn our *surahs* (chapters in the Qur'an). Nothing else. It was a small terraced house. We sat in the cold basement, all in a line learning the *surahs*

(chapters in the Qur'an) parrot like. ..The *Mulabe* (a member of the religious class) never explained the meanings of the *surahs* (Chapters in the Qur'an). Boys were on one side and girls on the other. When it was time for the *namaz* (prayer), the boys went upstairs and we [the girls] played hangman. (Laughs) We were obviously not important...there wasn't anyone there to see us anyway!

My mom never went to the mosque in England nor in Bangladesh. They don't go in Bangladesh, so I don't see what the big attraction is. I can call Allah anywhere...

The actual population may be anywhere from 2.4 to 11 million Muslims in the United States. (Haddad, 2004; McCloud, 2006). The Muslims populace in the United States has serious political ramifications. Establishing the numerical value theoretically translates into political and social leverage; the greater the number of Muslims, the increased chances that politicians, and United States domestic and foreign policy may be affected by Muslim issues, needs and desires. As a political reality, the Muslim numbers game is clearly reflected in the jostling by multiple diverse political interest groups who are eager that their "definite" figures on the American Muslim community are legitimized: AIPAC (American Israeli Public Affairs Committee), CAIRS (Council on American Islamic Relations), and MAS (Muslim American Society) the Pew Trust and popular News presses. (McCloud, 2006; Nimer, 2002; Haddad, Smith and Moore, 2006)

Nonetheless, even though the United States Census Bureau is forbidden to accumulate religious material, the Immigration and Naturalization Bureau has tracked and compiled the ethnic ancestry of origin, for all United States immigrants. Information from these government records indicates that Muslim migration to the

United States was fairly minute prior to 1965 (Gomez, 1994). Before 1965, the majority of immigrants arriving pre 1965 to the United States from Muslim dominated areas were not largely Muslim, but Christians and Jews (Haddad, 1999; Leonard 2003). The Immigration and Naturalization Service estimates that between 1965 and 1980, emigration from Muslim areas rose to 865,472, and that from 1991 to 1997, the figure again increased to 921,100. In the preceding 145 years before 1965 there was an annual average of 531 immigrants from Muslim dominated regions, however, post 1965 that figure escalates to 131, 586 per year. The Immigration and Naturalization Bureau ethnic statistics clearly reveals there was a dramatic increase in Muslim emigration to the United States after 1965. Muslim immigrants from the Indian Sub-Continent were estimated to number approximately 194, 900 (1990 United States Census) which puts them on par with their Arab counterparts (Haddad and Lummis, 1987; Nimer, 20002; Smith, 2002). The 2000 United States Census indicates that Bangladeshi's make up 0.31 % (95,294 out of 31,107,899) of all the foreign born residents of the United States.

The lion's shares of American South Asians although widely dispersed, reside in predominantly metropolitan areas. Most Pakistanis, who are very ethnically diverse in the United States, live in California, Illinois, New Jersey, New York, and Texas (Mishra and Mohapatra, 2002; Nimer, 2002). Significant numbers of Bangladeshis have settled in California, Detroit, and New York. Indian Muslims are prevalent in all of the above cities but the largest concentration dwell in Chicago. This material on spatial distribution is somewhat misleading, as the bulk of American Bangladeshi professionals who make up the greater portion of the immigrant population, are widely dispersed across the United States. The greater numbers of these professionals are employed by the technology, academic and medical sectors and thus are scattered across all 48 states, with a higher preponderance in California, Oregon, and Washington where many of the

high tech sectors are located. Most American South Asians Muslims live in low to upper middle class households, with the majority owning their own residences.

As a result of its size and the heterogeneity of its population, New York City provides a special filter for the convergence of Muslims from practically all regions of the world. It is the main port of entry for many immigrant communities. Recent immigrants routinely reside with extended family members in New York City before they establish themselves in the United States. This situation is reflected in the demographical data, which confirms that in New York City, South Asian Muslims generally have slightly larger households than the national average. As a consequence, when New York City is included, the economic and demographic indicators for Muslim South Asians become skewed. American Bangladeshi Muslims in New York City thus have lower household incomes than other South Asian immigrants, with their residential and settlement patterns reflecting their British counterparts to some degree.

Approximately 40% of all the taxi drivers in New York City are of South Asian descent. But the large majority of these individuals, who generally have achieved post-secondary education, see this as a transitional phase. Engaging in blue-collar service allows South Asians/ Bangladeshi's the time and space to accustom themselves to the United States and give them the money to cultivate more advantageous endeavors (Mishra and Mohapatra, 2002; Nimer, 2002). A large portion of transnational South Asian Muslims is employed in white-collar employment; 30 % were in professional occupations in 1990. As a group South Asians are over represented amongst managerial, sales, technical and clerical labor force and underrepresented amongst service and blue-collar workers (Mishra and Mohapatra, 2002; Nimer, 2002). The 1990 United States census revealed that American South Asians had higher educational levels than the nation as a whole. Additionally, the South Asian Female participation in

the labor force is extremely high, which correspond with very elevated rates of post secondary educational achievements.

### Rokeya

Rokeya is an engineer is in her mid thirties. She is a first generation British Bengali. Rokeya has two small boys. Both of the children go to Saturday school to learn the Qur'an and prayers. Rokeya's spouse did not grow up in Britain. He immigrated to Britain after graduating from BUET (Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology). Rokeya works full time and her work is something she very much enjoys; "something that I need and want to do."

Rokeya's husband was educated at a religious school until he was eight years old. Then, his farther decided that Rokeya's spouse was going to become an engineer he needed to go to the state school. Rokeya's spouse believes that his early start reading the Qur'an and memorizing it helped him to keep his faith close to him. Rokeya is quite lackadaisical regarding the ritual prayer, whilst her husband is very prompt. This caused some tension at the beginning of their marriage. However, Rokeya's spouse now feels that maybe when God wants Rokeya to pray, she will pray. Rokeya expressed a certain sorrow that she was not so regular in her *ibadat* (rituals of Islam). Rokeya articulate that she should pray but that sometimes it does not happen. There were always some distractions that kept her away from the praying.

Rokeya stated that she had never finished reading the Qur'an from "cover to cover". However, she quite frequently used Internet sources to help find answers to questions she had concerning the Qur'an. Rokeya displayed some confidence quoting from those Internet sources. However, perhaps as a consequence of her perceived

deficiencies in Qur'anic knowledge, Rokeya was not so secure quoting or talking about very specific *surahs* (chapters) in the Qur'an.

As they were incredibly busy individuals, Rokeya and her spouse appear to have divided up the household work. Rokeya's spouse repeatedly verbalized that he was always working all the time, at work and at home. However, many times the greater portion of the housework appeared to fall on Rokeya. She took both children to school and adjusted her schedule accordingly to bring them home again.

Rokeya's parents were middle class and lived within a predominately white neighborhood. She had gone to a local school where the majority of students were white. All of Rokeya's childhood friends were white Britons. Rokeya spoke fondly of her childhood, viewing it as, idyllic. However, much of her conversations indicated that she was somewhat anxious that her children were not growing up in a Muslim country.

I worry about them...what values will they take from here (Britain)? It is not a Muslim country...Yes, it is true that this is their country; they [do not] know any other home than this [Britain]. And you know after, 9/11 and the July incident here, [it has] been difficult to be Muslim [in Britain]. But now [it is] getting better...well home is, well [it is] here, England... even if they call me *paki* (a derogatory British slur for South Asians).

### British Bangladeshis

The picture for British Bangladeshis however, appears to be radically different. British Muslims and Bangladeshis are the least integrated amongst immigrant communities (most residentially segregated from white British), living in concentrated "encapsulated" enclaves (Eade, 1996), have low household incomes, are considered to be working class, display relatively low standards of education and are classified as

“Asian” or “black” (Smith, 1989). Bangladeshi Muslims are considered to be the antithesis of a model minority by the British State, even though they share similar social and cultural values to their American cohorts. However, this picture does cut along professional, class, and educational boundaries (Peach, 1990, 1997; ONS, 2004).

The 2001 (ONS, 2004) British census reveals some startling information pertaining to the South Asian Muslim Diaspora in United Kingdom. The expected growth for this population is very rapid, with over 50% of the populace less than thirty years of age. Currently it is estimated that there are approximately three million Muslims in United Kingdom, with 68 % of this population being of South Asian lineage. The biggest, (roughly 43 %) and most dominant Muslim group is comprised of Pakistani origins. As a body British Bangladeshis make up 0.5 % of Britain’s total population.

The British census shows that the vast majority of Muslims are heavily concentrated into a limited number of metropolitan areas: London (607, 000), Birmingham (192, 000), Greater Manchester (125, 000), and Bradford and Leeds region (150, 000). Ten out of the twenty highest Muslim populations reside in London Boroughs, which effectively situates London as the region with the highest Muslim concentrations in United Kingdom (Peach, 2005). The London zone that holds the largest Bangladeshi concentration is Tower Hamlets in East London, where they constitute 33 % of the total community and make up a quarter of all the Bangladeshi population of the United Kingdom. Bradford, Burnley and Oldham are other metropolitan regions that boost large numbers of Bangladeshis (Peach, 2005).

Muslims, but particularly Bangladeshis display the highest degree of segmentation of any ethnic British population (Peach, 1997; Ballard, 2001:2007). Residentially Bangladeshis have low owner occupation rates in comparison with other



minorities, even other Muslims. This discrepancy can be clarified in multiple ways; the majority of British Bangladeshis live in dilapidated inner city areas (such as Tower Hamlets) where housing historically has been and is currently an endemic problem, which renders the whole issue of purchasing property extremely difficult. Furthermore even if it is economically viable for British Bangladeshis to reside in a more affluent region, many continue to stay where their extended families, communities, and social links are embedded (Ballard, 2001; Begum and Eade, 2005).

British Pakistani and Bangladeshi's are the most economically marginalized of all the ethnic minority communities in United Kingdom. The emerging picture portrays them as being employed in older industries or holding down menial jobs (ONS, 2004). Cumulatively British Pakistani and Bangladeshi's have the lowest percentage of their populace in managerial positions, and comprise the highest percentage of the population that has either never worked or have been in long term unemployment (Modood, 1997; Gardener, 1998; Peach, 2005). Hence, as a group they have low incomes and are three times as likely to be unemployed than the general white population (Modood, 1997).

In reference to female participation in the labor force, women of Bangladeshi and Pakistani descent have the lowest economic involvement, which social scientists are apt to correlate with conservative "Islamic" values and ideas of "*izzat*" (honor) and "*pardah*" (curtain/ veiling) (Ballard, 2001:2007). However other research indicates that additional household pressures are of equal if not greater impediment to female employment and educational opportunities. Parents heavily rely on females and schoolchildren to fulfill domestic and childrearing tasks within the family unit (Turner-Rahman, 2009). Additionally unpaid female labor by wives working in their family business is not factored into the labor statistics. Summing up Muslims, especially

women appear to be compromised both socially and economically in Britain, where worth and prestige is predominantly formulated by connection to employment and class (Smith, 1989; Ballard, 2001).

The majority of British Muslims are relatively poorly educationally qualified, with almost 40 % having no secondary school academic qualifications at all. As a whole, Muslim children have tended to lag behind in educational achievement across the board. Moreover this low educational attainment is not limited to children since low proportions of British Pakistani and Bangladeshi women hold higher education qualifications (Coles, 2004). Social scientists are unable to explain this tendency (Peach, 1997). This academic failure tends to have very serious repercussions for subsequent Muslim employment opportunities and labor market experiences. Lately however this tendency appears to be showing signs of reversal, with the proportion of Muslim children in higher education slowly increasing. Research suggests a strong correlation between educated Muslim family and parents with the greater likelihood that these children will enter post secondary education. Thus development in terms of a highly educated British Muslim workforce may take a generation to unfold. (Coles, 2004)

Politically British Bangladeshis are conspicuous by their absence from prominent positions and organizations. There is a general reluctance within British Bangladeshi populations to participate politically. This is the result of many factors, but one of the reasons may be the “myth of return”. Both the British government and the Bangladeshi immigrants harbored the hope that they would return home to Bangladesh. Marla, a British Bangladeshi talks about her mother’s hope of return to her *desh* (country).

There was a huge trunk, actually two of them in the middle of our living room. You know, like trunks you would take to move *mal* (goods) on ships. We covered them up with bed sheets, nice ones, but bed sheets. The television sat on the top. Every time my mom brought any thing, saucepans,

trays, just stuff. It would all go in the truck for when we went back home. [To Bangladesh]

However, post 9/11 there has been a slow transformation as younger British South Asians have articulated a want and a need for political involvement. However it is also apparent that a great many of these individuals have become quickly disenchanted with the British political labyrinth (Brit, 2005). This political reticence is translated into and manifests itself in weak British Bangladeshi leadership, both in larger regional and national political and Islamic networks. Consequently British Bangladeshi Muslims find it relatively hard to articulate their voices both within British Muslim representative structures and within the larger British political establishment.

#### Choice of Countries

Both history and the labor market influenced the South Asian immigrant's selection of one country over another. Before 1970's nearly all migratory peoples to Britain were from the former British colonial territories. Great Britain's experience with immigrants and immigration is located within its colonial past; the United Kingdom's response and treatment of its immigrant subjects is situated within its psyche as the former overlord to South Asians (Lahiri, 2000; Sayyid, 2008) The United Kingdom and the white British population assumed a master mentality in their associations with their colonial immigrant citizenry. Thus the

“Ex-colonial settlers have to be understood within the context of the post-colonial condition”

Sayyid, 2008: 5)

In essence, what Sayyid is advocating is that researchers should endeavor to place official and media representations of diaspora South Asians narratives within the historical context of post-coloniality. Furthermore, discourse concerning South Asian culture development must take into considerations not only colonial history, but also the hierarchies of power that prevail in forming British societies.

The United States on the other hand, was largely devoid of a common past or shared history with its South Asian immigrants, and in many respects American South Asian immigrants have benefited greatly from this *tabula rasa* (clean slate). South Asians choose Britain because it embodied an aura of something elusive, yet familiar, an imagined familiar. Migration to Britain was facilitated by familiarity, a connection with the “colonial motherland” and established transnational and trans-migratory networks, which eased the tribulations of immigration and dislocation (Lewis, 1994; Lahiri, 2000; Mishra and Mohapatra, 2002). The Bengali word *Belat* literally means abroad, however it is utilized in the lexicon in connection to only one country; Great Britain. Bangladeshi immigrants to the United States were not going aboard, to *belat*, they were going to *Amreka* (Turner-Rahman, 2009). On Counterpoint to Britain, *Amreka* (America) was a wild country, the second choice and a place that was bereft of history and shared transnational links. (Turner-Rahman, 2009)

### Life in the United Kingdom

Post World War II labor markets fueled a tremendous need for the unskilled male peasant or proprietor class immigrant that arrived on British shores from the late

forties to the middle of the 1960's. Restricted to a limited spectrum of employment opportunities South Asian immigrants traditionally took jobs that Britain's white subjects were unwilling, or unable to do; unskilled jobs, which had arduous shifts with very long hours, for extremely low basic wages (Anwar, 1979; Sayyid, 2008). Early migrants endured great physical and mental hardship stoically, usually living in all male households in dilapidated inner city areas (Ballard, 2001). Very quickly a stereotype was created which painted

“the Asian was an undesirable who “smelled of curry: was dirty, wore “funny clothes”; lived packed like sardines in a room; practiced strange religions”

(Brah, 1979)

As a consequence South Asian workers became permanent tenants on the lowest rung of the British social and employment hierarchy.

The British Nationality Act of 1948 gave citizenship and automatic right of entry to people from the former colonies, inducing large numbers of males from Punjab, Mirpur and the Azad Kashmir regions of the Sub-Continent to migrate to the United Kingdom. The Bengali immigrants were heavily drawn from the district of Sylhet; many Sylhetis came from the four main rural hamlets of Beani Bazar, Habigani, Maulvi Bazar and Sunamganj (Eade, 1996; Gardner 1998). Determinants that induced these economic migrants to come to Great Britain, besides British citizenship and migratory access, were democratic and political tensions, lack of employment coupled with low income levels, economic and demographic dislocation as a consequence of the construction of the Mangla Dam, and demographic pressures in the post-colonial Sub-Continent (Anwar, 1979; Eade, 1989; Fisher, Lahiri and Thandi, 2007; Sayyid, 2008).

The male laborers had enormous aspirations of elevating both themselves and the lives of their kin. They left behind their families, envisaging short-term stays: long enough to make money and return home. However, once in Britain most males not only found it economically unfeasible to return home yearly, but they also instigated a chain migration of other male relatives and subsequently of their whole extended families. Thus migration from South Asia initiated a sequential effect with the relatives of each previous group composing each subsequent migratory group (Ballard, 2001). The process of chain migration led to Sylhetis virtually monopolizing migration to Great Britain from East Bengal (Gardner, 1998). Female South Asian migration to the United Kingdom was almost non-existent at this point. The domino progression of immigration clearly reveals that up until the early 1970's, with the migration of a small minority of physicians, most British South Asian immigrants were unskilled laborers and their kin.

The dynamics of chain migration clearly underlines the conspicuous spatial distribution of specific South Asian communities, in particular geographical regions in the United Kingdom. By its very disposition, chain migration ensures that it is kinship bonds that determine who is included, and who is excluded from migration (Ballard, 2001). Many of the manufacturing industries that employed the South Asian laborers were located in certain geographical regions; the light manufacturing industry and transportation systems in the Greater London area, especially South-Hall and Hounslow, the metal foundries and the garments industries of East and West Midlands, and the textile mills of the northern cities of Lancashire and Yorkshire (Fisher, Lahiri and Thandi, 2007). Therefore, there was a distinct settlement arrangement, where concentrations of different South Asian communities arose in particular regional

locales. The final destinations of almost all the newly arrived male immigrants, who formed the string in the immigration concatenation final, were the exact urban localities where their relatives or hamlet kinsmen were now working. These early settlement patterns are still strongly prevalent amongst South Asians in Great Britain today (Eade, 1989; Ballard, 2001; Peach, 2005; Fisher, Lahiri and Thandi, 2007).

Residential segregation of the British Bangladeshi community is a direct result of a complex mosaic of issues: low pay, lack of access to residence, employment and education and a very real need on part of the immigrant community to rebuild the society, the familial and communal bonds that they had left behind in Bangladesh. When it became evident that the myth of return was shattered, South Asians began to make emotional and financial investments for a prolonged stay in Great Britain. The influx of Asians/ Bangladeshi females in the mid 1960's propelled the creation of cohesive Asian/ Bangladeshi family neighborhoods out of the run down, depressed and abandoned areas where male immigrants were working and residing. These working class domains were already overcrowded, and residentially, economically disadvantaged and depressed, with very poor access to public services, South Asian shops and other amenities quickly sprang up around them, catering to Bangladeshi / Punjabi/ Gujarati wants and needs (Smith, 1989; Werbner, 1990; Gardner, 1998). Most of these services were provided by other South Asians and in many instances individuals from their former communities in South Asia.

For Bangladeshi women, the harsh realities of British life and culture were offset by the camaraderie and community that these "enclaves" provided (Abbas, 2005; Turner-Rahman, 2009). Miriam, a British Bengali woman remembers when she came to England:

“They boil the food all the time... you can put salt and tomato ketchup on it and it still tastes like water. The food [everything] was so big. When I first saw a *piaz* (onion) I just sat down and stared at it. I could cook twenty *tarkaris* (dishes) with it...

I missed my family. I found some friends, they were Calcutta Bengalis. We would meet everyday. They were nice. But I missed *deser abhahowa* (my country's atmosphere/ breezes). Here you had to phone to say, “I am coming in ten minutes time.” Or if they were *shada* (white) you had to let them know days in advance. When you knocked on the door, they made you standing on the doorsteps. Back home [in Bangladesh] you slip in and out of your neighborhood houses a dozen times a day. It was hard, but now I am used to it. It's was lonely, but when I got a job, I was tried all the time...but still I missed people.”

British Bengali females not only recreated societal and familial bonds but in many instances those bonds migrated with them, as whole villages eventually immigrated to Britain. Knowledge of English was not a vital necessity for a majority of these Bengali women, not that the educational access was available to them, but as Bangla was the Lingua Franca of their residential neighborhoods: females could go about their daily routine without much need for English.

### Life in the United States

The voracious American appetite for highly skilled labor both at an institutional and manufacturing level in the mid sixties propelled the influx of specialized graduates and postgraduate degree holders to the United States (Leonard, 2003; Haddad 2000: 2004). In the absence of established transnational networks, mainly upper and middle class men and women scholars and professionals were induced to immigrate to the



United States. South Asian immigration to America can be loosely divided into three corresponding decades or waves; the late 1960's, 1970's, 1980's / 1990's.

The 1970's saw the arrival of the highly educated professional worker (mostly male), whose female dependents arrived shortly thereafter. A majority of these spousal dependents did and still do not work outside of the home. The mid to late seventies again saw the emigration of highly educated professionals (a large number who were graduate students). The main difference between this group and previous immigrants was exhibited by the wives who were highly educated themselves, or quickly availed themselves of the educational opportunities present in the graduate school milieu, and who are currently active in the labor market (Mogelonsky, 1995; Leonard, 1993, 2003; Turner-Rahman, 2008).

The third wave is a direct product of the family reunification emphasis of the United States immigration policy, coupled with the immigration of large numbers of the East African South Asian expulsion, which resulted in an analogous migration mechanism to the one exhibited in the United Kingdom. The consequences in regards to immigrant demographics are also analogous to some degree; new immigrants are the relatives of old immigrants, with large segments of this third batch being slightly less educated than members of the first two groups. A large majority of these third wave immigrants are employed as small business owners, taxi drivers and employed in industrial capacities (Mishra and Mohapatra, 2002; Nimer, 2002).

The final wave of South Asians to enter the United States came as a consequence of transformations in immigration legislation. A diversity visa was created by the 1990 immigration law, whereby entrance to the United States is granted by lottery, for nationalities that have had proportionately low immigration rates to the United States since 1965. The "immigration lottery" has permitted several thousand new Bengali

immigrants to immigrate to the United States (Haddad, 2004). The resulting demographic shift is clear in comparing statistics from the 1990 United States Census data to that of the 2000 Census. The 1990's census establishes that ethnic groups with substantial Muslim populations have higher rates of education and household incomes than the nation as a whole. However, significant shifts have obviously occurred in the subsequent decade as the 2000 census shows that American Bengali household income dipped below the national average.

An intricate collage of issues is equally accountable for the residential integration that occurred in the American Bengali community: high salaries, access to education employment and residence, and the highly transitory nature of professional employment in the United States. The Majority of American Bengali female immigrants' arrived in the United States after 1970's, entering as students, wives or daughters of students or as highly educated professionals. Many women availed themselves to American educational access and actively sought higher degrees (Mishra and Mohapatra, 2002; Turner-Rahman, 2009).

In order to replicate lost familial and communal bonds, American Bengali females were forced to reproduce these affiliations and create new linkages across the diverse South Asian Diaspora and not just with other Bengali women. American Bengali females frequently report feelings of great loneliness, sadness and dislocation as Bengali festivals, celebrations and other life milestones were solitary and quietly celebrated, and passed without their families. However, in addition to the loneliness, American Bengali women talk of experiencing an independence that they found very hard to grasp at times; both in terms of understand and taking advantage of, an independence from restrictive ties to extended family and culture (Turner-Rahman, 2009).

Most American Bengali's first homes in the United States were either in university towns or in highly diverse urban areas, where lives were highly transient. The small South Asian communities that coalesced were continuously physically broken but emotionally upheld, when employment displaced them hundreds or frequently thousands of miles away. Bina discusses her initial years in the United States:

We lived in university quarters. There was a whole group of us; we lived in the complex because the heat was free and also all the other Bengalis were there. Na (No) the bachelors lived elsewhere because it was married student housing. I didn't have the children then. I was alone. I mean alone. I had never even slept alone. In Bangladesh I slept with my sisters, and then... [Her husband]... one day he went to a conference. It was the first time ever that I never slept alone...that I was alone. I ...it was strange...

*Dokan pat a gelay* (if I went to the shops) Americans would stop and talk. *Ora ohneck* (very) friendly... When people left, when they got jobs, it was sad for us. But [it was] happy and sad for them. It felt like losing a sister and brother all over again. *Phoney kautha koithoi* (we talked on the phone) and we went to see them.

Consequently new communities and bonds were re-forged and recreated in new places and new communities. Ergo American Bengali's were forced by necessity to speak English, to create bonds, linkages and connections with non South Asians and to integrate physically with the broader American society.

### Timeline of United States Immigration Policies

1790--- Any free white person can apply for citizenship

1798--- Alien and Sedition Acts mandated 14 years of residency before citizenship. In 1800 residency was altered to 5 years.

1857--- Free Africans declared non-citizens.

1868---13th Amendment granted African Americans citizenship.

1882--- Chinese Exclusion Act excluded Chinese immigration for 10 years Chinese Americans could not get citizenship.

1892--- Ellis Island opened.

1893--- Chinese Exclusion Act restated.

1917---set an "Asiatic Barred Zone," which excluded all immigrants from Asia.

1921--- Quota Act of 1921 limited immigrants to 3% of each nationality present in the US in 1910. Asians excluded; no limits on western countries.

1923---US Vs Bhagat Singh. Classified Indians as non-whites

1924--- Quotas altered to 2% of each nationality based on numbers in US in 1890.

1929--- The quotas of the 1924 Act are made permanent.

1943--- The Chinese Exclusion Laws repealed, and China's quota was fixed at a 105 immigrants yearly.

1952--- Migration and Nationality Act repealed race as a criteria for immigration or citizenship. Japan's quota at set at 185 annually. China's at 105; other Asian countries were given 100 each.

1965--- Hart-Celler Act repealed national origins quotas. It set different ceilings for the eastern (170,000) and western (120,000) countries. Preference was based on family ties, skills, and refugee status.

1965---Civil rights law passed.

1965---Large scale immigration from South Asia starts.

1990--- Immigration Act of 1990 restricted unskilled immigrants to 10,000/year, skilled labor requirements and family reunification major goals of American immigration.

### Timeline of United Kingdoms Immigration Policies

1948--- British Nationality Act 1948. Gave subjects in the former British Empire the right to live and work in the United Kingdom without a visa.

1948---Migration of male Indian immigrants to United Kingdom.

1962--- The Commonwealth Immigrants Act passed. New immigrants need to have employment before they came to U.K or have special skills that meet the "labor needs" of the country.

1962-1965---female South Asian immigration begins.

1968---Immigration act required immigrants to have a "substantial connection with the United Kingdom". Immigrants must be connected by birth or ancestry to a white British national.

1968---M.P. Enoch Powell calls for forced return of settled British South Asian immigrants.

1971---Immigration act created the concept of patriality or right of abode. So only work permits holders or immigrants with parents or grandparents born in the UK could gain entry.

1972--- Ugandan / East African Asians settle in the UK

1976--- Race Relations Act passed. Protection against discrimination on race, color, nationality but not religion. Racial protection for ethnic religious groups Sikhs and Jews but not Muslims.

1981--- Three new categories of citizenship made.

2003—Employment Equality Regulation prohibits discrimination based on religion and belief in various circumstances

## Immigration Policies

Immigration policy in Great Britain has historically and still continues to be tied to race, ethnicity and notions of blackness and whiteness. An examination of the various immigration legislations demonstrates how Britain actively colluded to exclude peoples of certain races and colors from entering its borders. Each successive immigration legislation has curtailed the rights and restricted the flow of black and brown immigrants whilst expanding the rights and flow of white immigrants.

The 1948 Immigration Act gave the populations of former British colonies the benefit of citizenship and automatic right to enter and work in Britain (Ramdin, 1987).

However, the 1962 immigration code forcefully attempted to limit entrance to black members of the former colonies whilst encouraging white commonwealth citizens.

The 1962 statute is cornerstone legislation, establishing the important precedent of the principle of the exclusion of black peoples even when they legitimately held

passports as citizens of the United Kingdom and the Colonies (Deakin, 1970; Ramdin, 1987; Anwar and Bakhsh, 2003). Since the act did not go into effect until

1965, it gave British immigrants a narrow window to bring their existing families or to return home, marry, and subsequently bring their new families. It is at this juncture that massive numbers of South Asian Muslim females migrated to the United Kingdom. British Bangladeshi's were the last South Asian group to complete their family reunification with full reunification occurring in the late 1980's (Fryer, 1984; Ramdin, 1987; Lewis 1994).

Furthermore, each successive change in British immigration legislation consolidated the race demarcations between white and non-white citizens (Anwar, 1979; Ramdin, 1987; Joppke. 1999). The direct link of descent by blood with the United Kingdom became the essential requirement for entry, a perquisite that South Asian immigrants could not possibly fulfill. The 1968 law limited entrance to the United Kingdom only to persons born in the United Kingdom, or who had one parent or grandparent who was born or was naturalized in the United Kingdom. The Government routinely engaged in word play to ensure that racial division was encoded into the Nationality charter.

The Immigration Act of 1988 repealed the unrestrictive rights of entry of spouses and children of settled immigrants; Britain thus effectively guaranteed white Commonwealth citizens with ancestral ties to the United Kingdom, and EEC (European Economic Community) nationals that their existing rights to family life would continue, whilst denying black and brown commonwealth citizens those very same rights (Joppke, 1999). Mala discusses race and class below:

"We lived in a white area. Looking back now I realize it was very working class area. All the kids were white... I remember one day my mom coming home from work, she looked shattered, and all the kids were out. One of them, the



brother of one my friends yelled out “look here comes a gorilla, let’s get the gorilla...I felt spilt...and ashamed and angry. I just stood there. I wanted to be with her [but] I was with them too. I now look back and think why didn’t I stand up for her? I still feel guilty...She [her mom] doesn’t even remember it. ..Says that she got called so many times...

Previous to the latter part of the twentieth century South Asians were not welcome in the United States, even though there has been a South Asian presence in the Americas since at least the beginning of the twentieth century if not earlier; mostly male peasants from the Punjab region (Leonard, 2003). In 1923 the Supreme Court case of the United States Vs Bhagat Singh resulted in classifying Indians as non-whites and thus denied Indians the right to naturalization. In addition, the California Alien Land Law of 1913 prohibited Indians from owning land, thus effectively stripping Indians of land rights. This law was invalidated in 1952 (Gomez, 1994). However no case has overturned the 1923 classification of Indians as non-white. South Asians who had previously been treated as Caucasians were not “free white persons” within the law. They were redefined “Asian” under the immigration and naturalization protocol (Gomez, 1994). This is interesting in light of the “White” racial classification that upper middle class and upwardly mobile South Asians now enjoy according to Leonard (2003). However other researchers such as Haddad (2000) and Turner-Rahman (2009) show a different aspect to the question of racial designation for American South Asians immigrants

...the reality is that immigrants from south Asia do face a color barrier. They experience this not necessarily in terms of professional or economic integration, but as a factor in social relations. Regardless of their professional achievements, they often experience an American society that finds it impossible to view Indians, Pakistanis, or Bangladeshis as other than “brown”

(Haddad, 2000: 252: in Coward, Hinnells, and Williams)

The Luce-Cellar Act of 1946 extended rights of naturalization to newly freed Filipino's and Asian Indians: their immigration quota was set at 100 people a year and thus South Asian immigration to the United States was really a non-issue. Large scale South Asian immigration, Muslim or otherwise, did not occur to the United States until after the enactment of the Hart-Cellar Act or The Immigration and Nationality Act Amendments of 1965, which abolished the system of national origin quotas. South Asian female and male Immigration increased dramatically from this point on (Gomez, 1994; Dannin, 1995). Initially Pakistani and Bangladeshi professionals were relatively slower to come to the United States, but their numbers really began to take off mid- to late 1970's. In contrast to the British model, American Bangladeshi males and females arrived in almost simultaneously, after the 1970's.

An examination of legislation concerning race and faith in United Kingdom and the United States of America reveals the stark racialization of Islam in Great Britain (Smith, 1989). Muslims are a faith community, crossing ethnic and racial boundaries and do not fit into a strict racial definition (Lewis, 1994). However the United Kingdom classifies Muslims as "Asians" and their common needs across race and ethnic divide, have received little or no response from the authorities. Local government grants and funds are based only on ethnic, linguistic and racial criteria. In order to receive aid, services and advocate for legislation favorable to them South Asians, Muslim, or otherwise were forced to build alliances and coalitions with British black immigrants from the Caribbean, and with white working class labor unions (Joppke, 1999). What this in effect did was to build an alliance between races, and helped to confederate all

immigrant peoples and Islam, in the United Kingdom under the classification of “Black Asian” and “working class” (Ramdin, 1987; Smith, 1989).

The United States in contrast to Great Britain passed the Civil Rights Act of 1965, which prohibits employment and discrimination based on race, religion, sex, and national origin by employers, employment agencies and labor organizations. The civil rights act, which defined an era of activism and self-determination for African Americans, coincided with the 1965 immigration act (McCloud, 2006). The social and legal repercussions of both these acts culminated in the 1980’s when

“...the US had become more open to diverse immigration could be explained mainly by the impact of the civil rights revolution, which led to the conclusion that it is wrong not only to abridge fundamental rights by race, religion, or nationality, but also wrong to base immigration policy on those considerations.”

(Fuchs, 1990:476)

South Asians arrived in the United States after the passage of the Civil Rights legislation which has wrought about significant repercussions; they have not needed to or have invested in the immense struggle waged by African Americans, and their predominately professional class has constrained them from embarking on coalitions with other peoples of color, or working class groups (Mishra and Mohapatra, 2002; McCloud, 2006).

Until very recently discrimination in employment on racial and religious grounds had been lawful in United Kingdom and discrimination in the provision of services and in the regulatory functions of public bodies is still lawful. The 1976 Race Relations Act of Great Britain declared discrimination on the grounds of color or nationality illegal, but not on the basis of religion. According to the act, Muslims do not constitute an ethnic group. In order to prove discrimination, Muslims would have to prove that they have been discriminated against as a racial group, where their religion

was the dominant factor. Religious discrimination only falls within the Race Relations Act if a religious group is also a “racial group”. Thus Jews and Sikhs in the United Kingdom are considered racial groups and are protected fully under the Race Relations Act (Anwar and Bakhsh, 2003).

Pressure from the EEC (European Economic Community) human rights commission helped pass the Employment Equality Regulation of 2003, which prohibit discrimination based on religion and belief in various circumstances. A new bill in 2006 makes willfully stirring up religious hatred a crime. The need to stop Muslim agitators in mosques stirring up hate rhetoric against other groups: Christians, Jews and other westerners, was the momentum behind the incredibly swift passage of the bill. The chronology of the above discrimination legislations regarding race and religion has fundamental repercussions in respects to assimilation, integration and national identity of each South Asian Muslim immigrant community to the United States and the United Kingdom.

The legislative contrast between the United Kingdom and the United States is profound. Racial and religious anti discriminatory laws have existed in the United States 38 years prior to these rights being fully established in United Kingdom. Essentially a South Asian Muslim immigrant to the United States has always had the right to be protected from racial and religious discrimination. This right has existed before the vast majority of American Bangladeshi immigrants had even entered the United States, whilst British Muslims have had to fight, struggle and form broad based coalitions for 60 years, to have this basic right extended to them. Thus, I would argue that the American state validated Bangladeshi and other South Asian Muslims as full citizens of the United States: full citizens with full rights of protection. The British State in contrast negated the value and status of its Bangladeshi and Muslim citizens to be

full citizens worthy of the state's full protection. I theorize that this is a significant factor in the divergent experiences and identities of the two South Asian Muslims communities.

Below Rokeya, discusses where she thinks it is easier to be a Muslim, her comments are particularly interesting as her daily praxis and other exegetical discussions involving the Qur'an were incredibly liberal:

In England everyone is what's the word? A non-believer aren't they? They don't do *ruza* (fast), they do not do prayer, and the shops do not close for *namaz* (prayer). And during *ruza* (fasting) time you still have to work. Muslim holidays aren't kept to. I think it's easier to be a Muslim in Dubai... I think people have forgotten their religion in Bangladesh. It's easier to be a Muslim in Dubai, basically because there is Sharia law there. You have *azan* (call to prayer), and *obviously* you have *azan* in Bangladesh as well but there are more practicing Muslims around you in Dubai. You can feel the Muslims and Islam on the street. But you can't feel it in Bangladesh, I don't think... People wearing *hijab* and there are lots of different mosques there. I am saying that people there [Dubai] in would be more religious, I'm saying that you feel, knowing that there's Islam around you makes you awaken to Islam, you feel like you're a better Muslim, a better Muslim in your heart. Your one to one relationship with God improves, because right or wrong that's what happens naturally.

Rokeya's narrative contrasts strikingly with the one made earlier by Jasmine. Essentially they are saying opposite things. Interestingly Hasina a doctor, who appeared perfectly happy in Britain, also comments below that it was simpler to be a Muslim in a Muslim majority nation.

It is easier to live a Muslim way of life when you are in a Muslim dominant country. You have dress codes, and you can find *halal* (permissible foods) easier. You do not stand out there when it's Ramadan. I have to find a place to pray in the hospital and which means that I miss my prayers. In a

Muslim country you have designated areas... and trying to find something to eat that doesn't have pork in every single thing. It is easier [in a Muslim country] there because there is no pork.

Again this contrasts dramatically with Bina's discussion. Permissible food appears to be a big concern for both Hasina and Rokeya. But Bina views lack of accessibility as a minor trail. For Bina, not finding permissible food just means that you change your diet. On many levels, I would categorize the experience, position and realities that British Bangladeshis and British South Asians faced and experience as being analogous to those of the African American community in the United States (McCloud, 2006).

### Discussion

In conclusion, both the United States and the United Kingdom imported labor to fuel their respective growing economies. The difference was both in the class of workers, and also in the attitude that each successive nation, took upon this exportation. In the United Kingdom, the myth of return was not only kept alive by the South Asian Diaspora, but also by the State itself. Working class laborers were imported by the state, with a myth that once the need was gone, the South Asians would return to their homeland. The strife and problems began when both the United Kingdom and the immigrants realized that the myth was shattered.

The United States on the other hand had no such myth. Its immigration policies post 1965 was positioned to make citizens out its immigrants. Meanwhile Britain actively worked against integrating and assimilating her Muslim and non-Muslims of color citizens. Her shared colonial past would not let her view South Asians as more

than second-class subjects and not as engaged citizens. Britain's Bangladeshis and other South Asians began to be problematic for the state when they began to push back and demand to be treated as full citizens. In contrast, the absence of a collective colonial history has enabled America to view and treat Bangladeshis and other South Asians as fully assimilated citizens. However, this view of South Asian Muslims has dramatically changed since 9/11 and there is a steady march towards the racialization of Islam in America.

## CHAPTER 4

### QUR'ANIC DOCTRINE

#### Tara and Miriam

What is the Qur'an? What does it represent, what actual and symbolic meaning does it hold for Muslims, and what sphere does it occupy in Muslim culture and how did this come about? This section will explore the Qur'an's origination, history, existence, doctrine and history as defined by Muslim orthodoxy and the symbolic meaning that it represents in Islam and for Muslims. Additionally, I will explore how Bengali women of the South Asian diaspora articulate the theology and doctrines of Islam.

Turner (1967) theorized that the significations of symbols in a culture could be grasped from three planes of meanings: exegetical, operational, and positional. Although the other facets of meaning are important, I will focus on what exegetical connotations are encapsulated in the Qur'an for Muslims. Illumination in exegesis

according to Turner (1967) stems from the examination of myths, ritual, the verbal and written doctrines and dogma in the specific religious tradition/culture, that is under contemplation. Turner (1967) explains that symbolic meaning in exegesis relies on three semantic platforms: the nominal, the name of the symbol in ritual and non ritual conditions and the substantial, the culturally designated physical characteristics: and the artifactual foundation, the symbol after its encounter with human processes.

The underlying premise of Arkoun thesis is that culture has an accumulation of suppositions that the cultural participants take for granted, and that these very assumptions are the de facto unseen perimeters of our cultural thoughts which promote us to think and see the world in specific ways. The assumption Vis-a- Vis the Qur'an that Muslims make according to Arkoun is that an all-encompassing closed system was set up in Medina by Muhammad on the foundation of an all-finalized Qur'an. This is far from the case, though the Qur'an stands at the heart of Islam and is its primary source.

The words of the Qur'an are recited in a child's ear for blessing. They are recited to bless and seal a marriage contract or a business deal, to celebrate a successful venture, or to express sorrow and solace in times of misfortune. Through the art of calligraphy, the words of the Qur'an have become the focus of Islamic art and are used to decorate Muslim homes, mosques, and public buildings... The Qur'an is ever present in the community through its recitation daily...

(Ayoub, 2004:49)

Tara



Tara is a twenty-four year old first generation Bengali American. She is a very vicious young girl, with a strong personality. She wore baggy sweats, skirts, dresses and looked liked any other college student. An engineering major, Tara has one older sister who is in medical school. Her parents are middle class and are both employed in healthcare. Tara's mother came to the United States, when she was seven years old, and returned to Bangladesh ten years later to have an arranged marriage. Tara's parents are now divorced and she stated in a very flat voice that her father was:

A charming man, very charming. There were some financial problems, and there was infidelity involved so they got divorced...my mom divorced him. He lives on the East coast now. It was hard for my mom...it took her a long time and a lot of courage...you know how our culture is...she tried to make it work...Her dad, my grandfather, he was supportive. He could see how hard she had tried. But her mom, my grandmother, she blamed my mom. She still blames her. ..My uncles supported her [because] they knew her.

In a very early interview, Tara indicated that she would be willing to go back to Bangladesh to get married. But in a much later interview her perspective had shifted dramatically. Now she spoke of the cultural divide that would be there, with a partner from Bangladesh. Tara wanted someone that could understand "what she was and where she was going culturally and religiously". Significantly, Tara was never used the term "back home" when she referred to Bangladesh. She declared that she was open to dating, and that she would not lie to me, as other young people might do. Tara stated that she needed to know her potential spouse, what their values were, where they had come from, and where they were going. Tara and another young woman in the study openly stated that they would defy cultural and religious barriers in regards to finding a spouse. It can be argued that Tara's line of reasoning is directly a consequence of seeing her mother unhappy arranged marriage unfold before her. That is entirely

possible. Although both narratives were related well after the divorce and thus the first narrative should have reflected a rejection of arranged marriage specifically.

Additionally Tara was quick to tell me that “I wouldn’t do anything that was not Islamic with the guy, but...” we did not ever explore what she thought would cross the limits of the Islamic “dating” boundary.

Tara’s family was affiliated with a South Asian mosque in her community, where she taught Sunday school. This was something Tara did to give back to her community. Moreover, Tara and her family attended a women only *halaqas* (prayer meetings), which she liked, since they were a place where she could get answers regarding the Qur’an from a knowledgeable speaker. It was important for Tara that she understands her faith properly. She declared that Muslim women assumed too much and were not proactive concerning their Islamic rights. Tara said that in Islam:

Women are given a lot of rights. I mean they’re given a lot. They just need to read about them and be knowledgeable about it. I think they just go with whatever they’re told, by their family, and by the *Mulabes*... I want to know my rights... You have classes for your rights as citizens of this country...but no classes for your rights as women. If I buy property, I want to know is it his, or mine or if I make money, is it his or mine ... in our culture, we don’t really talk about it...it’s not polite to talk about. Sometimes I feel rights are not polite to discuss but they are important...before we get married, it’s not polite to discuss these things. Like when you discuss the *meher* (payment to the bride on marriage), it is shameful to demand payment or ask for a big sum...No one thinks about his or her rights [because] they [do not] think it will end badly. But the Qur’an put those rights in because it was trying to address real life. If I’m aware of them, my rights I mean, I can be a better partner. You have to be aware of his rights too. I’m only [going to] marry someone whose [is going to] have this conversation with me.

Moreover, whenever Tara spoke about the attending the mosque or the *halaqas* (prayer meetings), the social aspects of the meetings were highlighted. Thus, for Tara,

these meetings were places where links with her community were made and reinforced. Additionally, the *halaqas* were also places where Tara felt she could broaden her horizons in regards to Islam and the Qur'an. Although Tara stated she had never asked any of the speakers whether it would be permissible for her to date. There are three ways of viewing Tara's reticent in this department, 1) her mother and other females of her community are present at these gatherings and the cultural shame of discussing sexual matters cross generationally is still prevalent, 2) Tara does not feel that this is one aspect of her life she wants to discuss, 3) or she does not officially want to hear an answer that she obviously disagrees with.

Tara's mother like Bina wore the hijab. Both Tara and her sister grew up wearing it. Tara articulated that the main reason she wore the hijab was she believed the Qur'an mandated covering and that a modest women, was to be covered from head to toe. Nonetheless, Tara took off the hijab before her parents got divorced. Tara indicated that the reason for her change came as a consequence of realizing that she wanted to live her life and she was not ready to cover from head to toe. Her sister took off her hijab after the divorce, and Tara's mother took it very hard. She feared that her community would blame her, for her daughter's rejection of the hijab. Obviously Tara's mother perceived her daughters continued observance of the hijab as a positive cultural marker for herself. Tara's mother's reaction is poignant because in some respects, she is responding to her daughter rejection of the hijab, in a similar fashion as her own mother reacted to her divorce.

### The Characteristics of the Qur'an

For Muslims the Qur'an is alive and to some extent has a semi human personality (Esack: 2005). The roles that the Qur'an performs in the lives of Muslims are recital, guidance, both spiritual and moral and the provision of meaning to this life and the afterlife. Muslims have a great reverence, love and respect for the Qur'an. Muslims tend to wrap it beautifully in special cloth, setting it on an especially reserved stand and ensuring it never touches the ground. There is a specifically designated elevated location in the house where the Qur'an usually resides and tremendous care and attention is taken to ensure that one's feet do not mistakenly point directly towards the Qur'an's resting place. (Esack, 2005; Turner-Rahman, 2009). Below Miriam, a British Bengali woman explains how she handles the Qur'an:

"I keep the *Qur'an sha'rib* in an *uchu jaga*, on an *uchu jaga* (high place) from myself. I try to keep it in a careful way... I keep it there because it is holy. Allah said in *surah* Baqara to keep in a good place and not to touch it without *wuzu* (ritualized ablutions). That is why I keep it so carefully...I try to do my best, if accidentally one day I have to hold the Qur'an without *wuzu*, well it happens. But I [really] try my best not do hold it like that."

In both ritual and non ritual situations Muslims approach the Qur'an by undergoing ritual purification. Its words, both written and oral possess enormous powers. The Qur'an's words heal, comfort and restrain malevolence. The written word of the Qur'an is used in amulets (*tabizz*) or adorns the walls of a house to warn away evil and heal the sick (Esack, 2005 and Turner-Rahman, 2009). In the above explanation by Miriam, what becomes clear are the connotations of holiness that the Qur'an has for her, by placing it in a location elevated in relation to her, she demonstrates her respect and reverence for it, whilst attempting to create a sacrosanct space around it. What is interesting about her narration is the element of pragmatism that flows besides the

reverence. Miriam is aware that attempts to keep the space around the Qur'an sacred may not be possible at all times. Her language is reflective of her pragmatism, as she does not make concrete command statements such as "I do not".

The Qur'an literally means 'the recitation'. As such it was initially was transmitted orally, and reflected speech and not a concrete or complete written text. According to tradition, during the 23-year span of revelation, each newly revealed verse was carefully memorized by Muhammad's companions and it was only after his death that a *mushaf* or official recension was undertaken, whereby the essentially oral text became a fixed written text (Barlas, 2002). Graham (1984) points out that until very recently sacred texts were materials committed to memory that served the purpose of communal sharing and recital.

"The "proper noun" sense of *qur'an* in the Qur'an is that of a fundamentally oral and certainly an active ongoing reality, rather than a "written and closed" codex such as it later represented by the *mushaf* written copies"

(Graham, 1984:373)

However, the original orality of the Qur'an is still retained for Muslims, since the large majority encounters it and discovers its transcendent meaning by the twin acts of recitation and listening (Denny, 1987). Moreover as a preponderance of Muslims can neither read nor write Arabic, in a real sense the Qur'an exists primarily as evocative acoustics and not script (Rasmussen, 2001). Thus Qur'anic

"Meaning, for the vast majority of Muslims today, is still located primarily in the act of recitation or listening to it. A recognition of the beauty and extraordinary power of the recited Qur'an is nearly instinctual to Muslims."

(Esack. 2005:21)

Hasina, a British-Bengali doctor, spends many hours on the road and away from her family. Her demanding occupation brings her a great deal of stress, not all of it from her professional activities. Hasina articulated that perhaps much of this angst was self-inflicted. Although her parents and husband fully support her working, Hasina felt substantial guilt and internal strife for not giving her children and family “one hundred percent”. Moreover, before becoming a doctor she was very regular in the performance of her ritual prayers but now noted that, her prayers were often *kaza* (late). To alleviate some of this *durbul* (uneasy or unwell) feeling, she had downloaded the entire Qur’an on her iPod, to listen to it whilst commuting. Hasina indicated that although she was not actually performing *namaz* (prayer) she was still getting *swab* (blessing) by engaging in the act of listening to the Qur’anic recitation.

The sounds of the recitation themselves are powerful whether immediately intelligible or not. Alternately Bina, who puts more emphasis into actually studying the Qur’an as book viewed the subject a little differently,

“Heh (yes) the actual *shur* (sound) sounds good, although all the meaning [of the Qur’an] I don’t know of course. If I knew all the meaning, maybe it would [be different] ...the sound, it is like it’s [the Qur’an] beating and knocking against my chest.”

In making this statement, Bina emphasizes that for her, the beauty of the Qur’an is actually linked to the discernment of its meaning. The usage of the phrase “knocking at my chest” underscores the mode of seeing and actualizing the Qur’an that is most important to Bina. Furthermore, for Bina the Qur’an is guidance to this life, it knocks on

the door of her chest, asking to be allowed into her life and be incorporated into her praxis.

On the other hand, Miriam, experiences the orality of the Qur'an slightly differently:

“Oh *ohneck ahram lagee* (I feel such comfort/ luxury), I don't know how much *ahram*. When I recite it, I can't do it; my recitation does not come out that way. When the Saudi *Mulabes* read it, I wonder why I am still here in this world, it so effects my heart... its seems that what Allah is saying, everything is true, it ...I can see it in front of my eyes, it seems like its true; How *hashuri's matt* (the judgment field) will be, *keamot hobey* (judgment will happen), and *beecher hobey* (judgment will happen), I will have to go into the *kobor* (grave), the angel will come in the grave, that's how it effects me. Not everyone's *pora* (reading) has the same results; my *pora* will not knock on anyone's mind. A really good *mulabe*, (religious class) their *pora* is so very sweet, like *moodhu* (honey/ sweet) reading. “

An examination of Miriam descriptive narrative shows multiple layers of meaning. Firstly, she views the actual recitation as an art form that only a select few are accomplished at, which hints, that although the Qur'anic recitation may bring otherworldliness to this world, it is highly dependant upon the oratory skills of the reciter. The question of legitimacy in recitation is thus fore grounded by Miriam. By specifically naming Saudi Arabian reciters, Miriam may unconsciously be establishing a hierarchy of legitimate Qur'anic reciters. Moreover Miriam's expressive narration effectively underscores the evocative nature of the Qur'an; stirring numerous senses, sight (in front of my eyes), sound, and taste (honey). Thus for Miriam, listening to the Qur'an becomes an inherently indulgent and sensual act of luxury that she undertakes for herself. Miriam's account is striking in her clear lack of fear of both death and the afterlife. Furthermore, it's intriguing that she chose to articulate death, the grave and

the judgment field as the focus of the Qur'anic recital. Much of this may be reflective of her age, as her words seem to imply an acceptance of death and how things will be in the next life.

Rokeya experienced the oral nature of the Qur'an in different manner from Miriam:

When I hear the Qur'an I really feel at peace. Its words are really comforting and soothing. It's very difficult to put into words... One day, when I was in Bangladesh, I heard a flute player outside. His playing was so melodious, it made me relaxed and totally at peace with myself. That is what it likes when I hear the Qur'an." She laughingly says "Maybe I wouldn't feel so much peace if I actually understood all the words. It would probably freak me out... highlight my sins; what you should be doing but are not"

There are actually multiple firsts occurring in Rokeya description. She is the first of the women to use the "peace" in connection with the Qur'an; Miriam implies it but does not actually use the word. Moreover, Rokeya makes linkages between the peace given by the Qur'an and Bangladesh. A Muslim who appeared conflicted regarding her non-practice of some of the *ibadat* (rituals) of Islam; Rokeya correlates the peace that she attains by hearing the Qur'anic recitation to a lack of knowledge. Interestingly she articulates that were she to gain an understanding and knowledge of the Qur'an, the peace that she currently feels may be displaced.

The rhetorical effectiveness of the Qur'an rests primarily as recitation and the Qur'an itself articulates the impact of its own recitation on the listener.

"God has sent down the fairest discourse as a book  
So similar in its oft repeated  
Whereat shiver the skins of those who fear their Lord



Then their skins and their hearts soften to the remembrance  
of God”

(39:23) (Translated by Asad, 1980).

The Qur’an’s words are full of sacred blessing (*Baraka*), which imply that there is a perceived power and spiritual function to the uttered Qur’an (Rasmussen, 2001) Whilst revering the written Qur’an, it is in the oral recitation that Muslims experience its awesome sense of holiness, and other otherworldliness. Moreover, Muslims share in the early childhood cohort experience of learning at least some part of the Qur’anic Arabic word by heart (Eickelman, 1992.)

### Miriam

Miriam is a British Bengali woman in her sixties. Both Miriam and her family arrived in the United Kingdom, in the mid seventies. She joined her husband a year and half later he immigrated to Britain. She has two daughters. Miriam is a quite woman, who has a” small circle of friends but lots of acquaintances”. Miriam comes from upper middle class family in Bangladesh. Her natal family all perform the *ibadat* (rituals of Islam) regularly. Miriam stated that before her teenage years she was not really interested in the Qur’an. But, at fourteen Miriam came to the realization that no one but she would take care of her. Thus, she pestered her aunt to teach her the prayers. Miriam is a deeply devout Muslim, who prays and reads the Qur’an ever day.

Miriam lived in Bangladesh through its war of independence from Pakistan. Both Poppy and she share a deep interest in Bengali politics. Both women are very adept at political discourse, conversing cogently with the, males within their families and within their larger community. Even though Sheik Mujib (the founder of

Bangladesh) built his vision of Bangladesh as a strictly secular nation, Miriam is deeply attached to his memory and the principles that founded Bangladesh. It deeply saddened her that after Mujib 's assassination, Zia the subsequent leader of Bangladesh stripped Mujib of this honorific title. Miriam spoke of standing on a field, before independence listening to Mujib. Miriam is still moved by Mujib's speech, portions which she can recite from memory. Miriam explained

We had nothing, no guns, and no ammunition. We were a country of poor rice farmers. But he was charismatic. He stood, saying, "We have our hoe. That is the only weapon we need". I will always remember that speech till the day I die.

Miriam's parents died when she was very young. And she still verbalizes her hurt and sorrow of becoming an orphan so young. Like Poppy, Miriam expressed the initial loneliness of leaving her extended family behind when she came to Britain. Miriam, just like Jasmine's mother loved cooking. She showed her love for her family by keeping them all well fed. In Britain, Miriam worked when her children started school. However, she did not enjoy it as Rokeya does. It was a for her a belief to stop working, a burden that Miriam wanted gone as quickly as possible. The millstone in working was for Miriam, the inability to pray on time. She talked of how missing a prayer would:

[My] heart, it would become anxious, *chot put korthu* (would become agitated) with my breast, if I didn't pray on time...it settled down after I prayed."

When she stopped working, Miriam devoted more of her time to God and the Qur'an. For the first time in her life, Miriam indicated she became selfish and concentrated largely on her needs. This is an interesting observation, and taken with the comments regarding working outside the home, illustrates the different ways that

Muslim women may perceive oppression. Rather than seeing the Qur'an and the *ibadat* (rituals) as things that took time away from her, Miriam in fact articulates that it was the economic work outside the home that were oppressive to her. This is oppositional to what conventional Western feminism may convey. However, Miriam's years in paid employment have given her a strong voice concerning economic decisions in her marriage. Although it is difficult to gauge Miriam had not worked whether this would still be the case.

### Reading the Qur'an

As stated above the Qur'an literally means 'the recitation', however, often however it is treated just as a written literary composition by non-Muslims, and taken as such the Qur'an can be a difficult "read". The reading of the Qur'an demands an oral recitation that in many ways imitates its actual revelation to Muhammad (Juynboll, 1974; Sells, 1999). Muslims recite portions of the Qur'an regularly (Rasmussen, 2001 and Turner-Rahman, 2009). Miriam, consistently set aside time daily, to "read" in Arabic with a Bangla translation, a specific surah. However, as with other Muslims, this reading was not carried out in a sequential manner. Thus Miriam's reading imitates Muhammad's revelatory process; reciting and attempting to grasp a portion of a surah or a whole surah depending on length or topic.

Early on in the research process Miriam selected a *surah* (chapter in the Qur'an) that "spoke to her", whilst in later encounters she appeared to be attempting to proceed sequentially as the Qur'an is physically structured or as one would read a western narrative (Turner-Rahman, 2009). The Bible serves as the literary blueprint against

which all other sacred texts are evaluated in the West. It and its archetypes have deeply influenced Western literary expectations and assumptions of what a sacred book should be (Cragg, 1988) In an American/ European engagement with the Qur'an, cultural assumptions regarding reading, narrative, and text often comes negatively into play.

The Qur'anic narrative shifts thematic registers frequently and suddenly, traversing from mystical passages to sacred history, from law to the struggles and conflicts pertaining to Prophet Muhammad with little or no notice (Sells, 1999). For a Western non-Muslim reader the Qur'an lacks clear themes, with multiple themes appearing and disappearing mid topic. Other elements that appear missing for western non Muslims are the apparent absence of specific sections, lucid narratives, character or plot development, or any dimensions of narrative closure and a lack of temporal linear progression Therefore readers accustomed to a sequential, linear narrative mode, find great difficulty in deciphering a text that appears to be the antithesis of all that they are used to reading (Neuwirth, 2006). The difference in narrative style and absence of familiar narrative markers relative to a western-European model creates great obstacles in the appreciation and understanding of the Qur'an by western readers, who find its composition "odd," "curious "jumbled" and the Qur'an confused and confusing.

The Qur'an makes perfect sense to Shabana, an American-Bengali, who articulates her sense of reading the Qur'an thus:

In many ways I correlate to it an ongoing conversation between God and Muhammad. When I "read" the Qur'an I have stepped into the midst of a conversation between participants sharing a prior narrative history and worldview, which I may not share or understand. The conversation flows and meanders, assuming that I will "catch up" but not waiting for me to become comfortable with its world. In this analogy I want to stress that the Qur'an was sent down firstly as a spiritual and moral guide to a specific a historical people in a cultural context far different from mine, who shared a common historical,

cultural and mythical narrative with its listeners. And who would comprehend all the “odd, curious, and repetitive references”. As a “reader” far removed from the historical and cultural context of the revelatory period it is up to me to inform myself of this shared background, in order to understand the nuances of the conversation.

On the other hand Farid Esack reads the text of the Qur’an somewhat differently:

Rather than a message from God, it may be described as a letter from God and readout by the Prophet.

(Esack, 2005: 42)

### The Qur’an as the Word of God

Muslim theology decrees that the Qur’an is the word of God (*Kalam Allah*), His uncorrupted word conveyed by the Angel Gabriel (*Jibreel*) to the Prophet Muhammad, who in turn transmitted it without error or embellishments to humanity. Consequently, the Qur’an is divine discourse, transmitted as a scripture. The Qur’an is not created, since the archetypal or real Qur’an resides with and has eternally resided with God. This means that the Qur’an is non-temporal, and does not have a human history. This a-temporal characteristic has very important ramifications for Qur’anic interpretations and modernity. Furthermore, the Qur’an is considered to be inimitable, inviolate, unequalled, and indubitable (Esack, 2005). The axiom of the Qur’an’s eternalness (*detain*) and its uncreatedness, which exist together with the doctrine of its inimitability (*‘ijaz*), again has profound repercussions for Qur’anic exegesis (Esack, 2005). The combinations of these three dogmas are the rationale given by scholars for the paucity of historico-literary criticism of the Qur’an by Muslims.

Muslim doctrine moreover believes that the Qur'an, which is the Speech of God, is eternal, and uncreated in its essence and sense, but is created in its letters and sounds (Esack: 2005). Although the Qur'an is a revelatory text, it would be a mistake to assume that it is the Muslim "Bible". Whilst the Qur'an is scripture, the actual analogous position that it holds for Muslims is comparable to that of Jesus Christ in Christianity; Jesus is the word of God made flesh and the Qur'an is the word of God made scripture /text. Hence, in essence both the Qur'an and Jesus exists as God on earth, and in Islam, to invoke the Qur'an is to invoke God (Rahman, 1980). The notion of God's speech on earth is not totally without precedent in Biblical literature, as many Jews consider the Pentateuch to have been received directly from God. In addition, Jews believe that Moses was the direct recipient of God's word and therefore the Israelites are the indirect heirs of that word.

However, the ethnographical data collected for this dissertation, reflects a shifting interpretation of Islamic doctrines of the Qur'an. Although, all the women in the study declared that yes, the Qur'an was the Word of God. The majority did not express the idea that it was God on Earth. They also did not express its a-historical nature, as theologians have expressed, and in fact their thoughts surprised me in their fluidity. Miriam declared that the Qur'an was:

"It is Allah's words. Allah's words that he sent down. Its was brought by *Jibreel* (Gabriel), he brought it as a message and then hazarat Abu Bakr he would write it down on leaves, or on what ever he found. This *Qur'an Shurib* was apparently joined together after 23 years. Then, when it was all together, Hazarat Usman or was it Umar... he joined them together and slowly the Qur'an was created one by one. It took a long time; to make the whole Qur'an. Allah didn't throw down the whole Qur'an in one swoop. The whole Qur'an grew day by day; **slowly slowly it took birth because of peoples actions** (my emphasis). When things

happened to people, and they got into *bebot* (trouble) then Allah from the heavens sent down messages to Prophet Muhammad; do this, say that, that's how the *Qur'an Shurib* got made. "

This explanation is striking in its usage of the words "slowly slowly it took birth because of peoples work". Miriam articulates her awareness that not only is the Qur'an created by God, but that its creation is directly linked to the history and lives of the first Muslim community. She coherently reinforces the orthodox doctrine of the Qur'an being the words of God but then she circumvents encircling the Qur'an, with a static analysis of this orthodox doctrine. Miriam enunciates the inherently human movement behind the Qur'an; Interestingly Miriam, in her exegesis equates the Qur'an as a problem solving text.

Poppy, also verbalizes the concept of the Qur'an as a problem solver.

Analogy is used by Poppy to ground her argument

"It is Allah's *kautha* (words). If I said Lipi don't do this and you wrote it down. If I said don't fight with your husband; live in peace and harmony together. I sent a message for you not to fight with your husband and I sent that message with someone and you wrote it down...that was what it was like with the Qur'an. And everyday, I ...sent down he message... everyday that message got written down. That is what we call the Qur'an. ..*Heh* (yes) there is a history. The Qur'an will exist forever. I have read it. Allah said 'no one can destroy the Qur'an, nobody. Allah will look after it. They will not be able to change it; will not be able to change any of the words."

Poppy's reading again highlights the notion of the Qur'an as a guide, but she integrates an ongoing and dynamic aspect. Poppy's exegesis indicates that like Miriam, she apprehends the reactionary nature of the Qur'anic text. Moreover Poppy expresses an

acceptance of a history, which is associated with the Qur'an, however she does not and never did clarify what she meant by "history". Also it is striking that Poppy appears to adhere to the doctrine of the Qur'an's eternalness, but further along in her commentary she qualifies her statement by suggesting that eternal is associated with the incorruptibility of the Qur'an's words.

### The Miracle of the Qur'an

Muslim doctrine articulates that every prophet is given a miracle verifying that he is God's prophet; hence Muslims consider that the miraculous and inimitable nature of the Qur'an is proof of Muhammad's Prophethood (*risalah*). Thus the Qur'an is Muhammad's miracle. In what respects does Muslim doctrine articulate the unique and peerless nature of the Qur'an? The perfection of the Qur'an lies in its intrinsic linguistic, stylistic and aesthetic nature. The doctrine of the inimitable and miraculous character of the Qur'an synchronizes with the ideology of Muhammad's illiteracy, since an illiterate prophet could not have "written" the nonpareil Qur'an (al-Tabari, 1987). Interestingly early exegetes such as al-Tabari accepted that Muhammad could read and write, although perhaps not fluently (Esack: 2005). Muhammad is referred to as '*al-nabiyy al-ummiy*' in the Qur'an, which Muslim exegetes have read and understood to mean 'the unlettered prophet' or the illiterate prophet (Burton, 1993). However, etymologically the phrase can and has been read as "a prophet for the unscriptured people", or a prophet for people without a scripture, which according to Armstrong (1993) is more in line with Muhammad's own perception of himself and his Prophethood.

Miriam, when questioned about Muhammad's ability to read and write said



“No that is true, really true. He [Muhammad] couldn’t read but later, he could read, but not write. When *Jibreel* (Gabriele) came to him and said “*Iqra*,” *Iqra* it means read. Then, he must have learnt to read. But before that he [Muhammad] did not know how to read. He couldn’t understand. He was illiterate.”

It is salient that Miriam, although acknowledging Muhammad’s illiteracy uses personal experience of learning a foreign language, to arrive at an interesting conclusion, that once Muhammad learned to read, that gift would then not disappear. That once Muhammad gained the power of literacy, he could then not be declared illiterate. When I asked why she believed Muhammad could at some point read, but not write, Maryam pointed to her children, who although able to read *Koop karup Bangla* (very bad Bengali), but simply could not write Bangla.

Going hand in hand with the Qur’an’s eternalness (*detain*) and inimitability (*‘ijaz*) is the doctrine of supercessionism, which declares that

“...any given religious dispensation remains valid until the coming of the one to succeed it; then the new dispensation abrogates the previous one”

(Ayoub, 1989: 27)

Supercessionism is fundamentally the refusal to recognize the possibility that salvation can be achieved through other religions. The Qur’an declares that it is a continuation and a purification of all earlier revealed religious texts. It accuses the Jews and Christians of willfully altering their scriptures (Ayoub, 1992; 1989). Thus exegetes have generally concluded that this distortion negates the previous scriptures and consider the Qur’an the only valid scripture and path to salvation.

## The Language of the Qur'an

Approximately the size of the Old Testament, the Qur'an was revealed in Arabic, to the Prophet Muhammad over a span of 23 years. The doctrine of the inimitability of the Qur'an, coupled with the affirmation that Qur'anic Arabic is flawless, and unmatched has fostered the notion that Arabic is the best of languages, an exalted sacred language (*lingua sacra*), and the "language of God". Muslims maintain that reciting the Qur'an in Arabic is itself a mode of worship, where every sound produced is understood as a glorification and praise of God. As such, reciting the ritualized prayers in any language other than Arabic is considered to invalidate the prayer. Rokeya stated that a Muslim must pray the ritualized prayers in Arabic, since it said so in the Qur'an. Furthermore, Poppy makes clear that this is an issue that is prominent in the minds of diaspora Muslims:

"No there are a lot of questions regarding this. I [hear] a lot of questions come to the *Mulabes* (religious orthodox class) about it. They say that it... [Is] in the Qur'an that you have got to read the Qur'an in Arabic.... I [did not] find this. But the *Mulabes* (religious orthodox class) say this. But a lot of people now question that. They ask we want to read it in English, and we don't know (Arabic)...I do not know because the *Mulabes* (religious orthodox class) say no matter how much time it takes you, should try to read it in Arabic."

The Qur'an does address the issue of its "Arabness" declaring that the Qur'an's language is "this is plain/ clear/ Arabic tongue/ speech/ language" (Translated by Asad: 12:2, 1:37, and 16:103). However, it articulates the idea of language by the word *lisan*, which literally means tongue, the organ that produces speech. *Lugha*, another term for language, utilized widely in standard and classical Arabic does not occur at all in the Qur'an. Still medieval exegetes such as Shafi'i read and made an artful movement in interpretation from an impersonal/ objective mode, the communication role of any

language, to a subjective state, so that the clarity of language is conferred only on Arabic (Burton, 1993). This collapsing of the Signified with the signifier buttressed the theological logocentrism of orthodoxy and provided justification for making Arabic the *lingua sacra*.

The question of authenticity in regards to Arabic is addressed by Miriam, who states:

Of course if you read it in your language you get *swab* (blessing). Why wouldn't get it? But it's better to read it in Arabic no matter how much *kostu* (difficult) it is. If you ask me which one would [I] choose my choice would be Arabic. [But] I would only read it in Arabic because I love our *nabi* (prophet) so much. It was his language, so I will try [to] follow him. The Qur'an says whoever loves our *nabi* (prophet) loves Allah. It also says to Muhammad that it's not your language, but Allah knows how hard you are striving to read this in Arabic; you'll get more *swabs* (blessing). It's important [to read] in Arabic because Allah said that our *nabi's* (prophet) *naktee bhasa* (mother language) was Arabic. I found the line in the Qur'an "oh Muhammad, I made the Qur'an Arabic because your language is Arabic." I do not know which way to go because the *Mulabes* (religious class) says that no matter how much time it takes you try. It's his language...Allah also says that, I gave you the Qur'an in your language to make it easier, easier for you. ...So maybe if he were born in Pakistan it [the Qur'an] would be in the Pakistani language. But When you read it in Arabic, you must read the meaning too. It is most important that you will understand it. It's important to understand the Qur'an. But this is very *high kautha* (complicated philosophical discussion); you have to ask very learned *Mulabes* (religious class) about that.

Miriam shows that she clearly grasps that the Qur'an was delivered in Arabic since it needed to be comprehensible to both Muhammad and his followers. There is very much an internal struggle that is being contested in Miriam's explanation; acknowledging that there is nothing intrinsically special about Arabic per se, she nonetheless is willing to read the Qur'an in Arabic because of its association with the

prophet that she so loves. Additionally, Miriam voices her understanding of the issues, only to capitulate to orthodoxy by indicating that the subject is too complex for a layperson.

Bina on the other hand states that Arabic

It is not special ...because [it is] our Prophet's language. That's why it gets so much respect. It's only special because it is our Prophets mother tongue and nothing else. All the women at the *masjid* (mosque) they are always telling me, why don't you learn Arabic? Why? I can read the Qur'an in Arabic; I don't need to speak it. They think we say our *namaz* (prayers) and read the Qur'an in Bangla. I am happy with my mother tongue. I can speak English too. Then, they say teach your children Arabic; they know English and Bangla, how many languages do they need know? Does anyone have the time? Anyway, did you know that the Arabic they speak is not the Qur'an's Arabic? They all speak different dialects, like the difference between Barisal, Sylhet and Noakali (areas of Bangladesh)...I go to the *masjid* (mosque) to find God and society, not to become an Arab!

Muslim theology concludes that Qur'anic Arabic is the dialect of the Quraysh, Muhammad's tribe. This thesis is taken from the Qur'an itself, which states "And we have sent no messenger, save with the tongue of his people that he might make clear to them" (Q 14:4). Therefore it logically follows that the revelations were received and vocalized by Muhammad in the language of the people he was preaching to, the Quraysh. Western scholars (Jeffrey, 1938; Bell, 2001,) have argued that that Qur'anic Arabic is in fact a form of lingua franca or trade language that was understood throughout Arabia. Additionally other scholars postulate that Qur'anic Arabic is not actually "pure" Arabic and is interspersed with loan words from an Aramaic-Syriac language group (Jeffrey, 1938; Luxenberg, 2000). However, a significant number of these loan words were already prevalent in pre-Islamic Arabia and thus can be

considered to have been components of the Arabic language long before the revelation of the Qur'an. Muslim exegetes such as Ibn Abbas, Abu Ubayd and Suyuti forthrightly discussed the loan words or non Arabic words contained in the Qur'an, hypothesizing that foreign words had become incorporated and Arabized through ancient Arabic trade contacts (Esack: 2005).

The concept that any language or discourse is absolutely free or inoculated against other languages is contrary to most linguistic principles- the inter-relatedness of human speech. Intriguingly Muslim exegetes discussed and dismissed applying linguistic principles to the Qur'an. They rationalized that, as the Qur'an is God's speech and not man's speech, it follows that the Qur'an cannot be subjected to the same linguistic principles, which are applied to human speech. Gods own eternalness and self-subsistence are amalgamated with those of his revelation. Therefore, what has transpired is that the Qur'an and its language came to be viewed as essentially timeless and independent of any non-divine elements, including non Arabic languages.

As most Muslims are not native speakers of Arabic, they make use of "Qur'anic translations' to "better understand" the entire divine message (Turner-Rahman: 2009).

Farah, an American Bengali in her late twenties declares:

"It's important to understand the meaning because those that read it without meaning, they don't know what they are reading on and on. Sitting up and sitting down, without understand. It's better to understand, to really understand"

And Poppy states that:

"I think that translations are good. But it is O.K. for me. I can read Arabic. After I read the Arabic, I read the Bangla and it's exactly the same word written below. If they had written it wrong, I can catch it. "

However, problematic issues arise when addressing translation of the Qur'an into other languages. The doctrine of inimitability presupposes that the language of the text cannot not be reproduced or duplicated in any shape or manner. This injunction against translation is rationalized by the premise that since the Qur'an is the literal word of God, a translation would be sacrilegious as it distorts God's words and abrogates the miracle of the Qur'an. This is an interesting argument since Islamic narratives and history report incidences of Qur'anic translations ensuing in Muhammad's era; the surah al-Miriam was translated so the Negus of Abyssinia could appreciate it and a letter containing Qur'anic ayats was similarly translated before being delivered to Heraclius, the Byzantine Emperor. Moreover Salman, a Sassanid companion of Muhammad, apparently carried out a Persian translation of the Qur'an (Rahman, 1982).

The only admissible form of Qur'anic translation in Islam is an exegetical or an interpretative kind, where Qur'anic words are interpretations or paraphrases. Muslims understand Qur'anic translations as conveying the sense, essence, or meaning of the Qur'an but do not see the translated Qur'an as the actual sacred book in another idiom, since it can and will only ever exist in Arabic. There are other more mundane quandaries in relation to Qur'anic translations. The act of translation, any translation, shows a disparity between the original text and the reproduction, which results from the narrow confines of the translative sorting process. In addressing enigmatic and difficult Arabic words, the majority of translators transformed the terms corresponding to their actual world referent rather than keeping to the core system they bear in the Qur'anic Arabic of the original text (Esack, 2005; Cragg 1988; Rahman, 1982). Basically, the writers transmitted the words referential/ contextual connotations instead of their

denotative or dictionary meaning. Translative maneuvers of this nature do irreparable harm to the original text since they effectively obscure the semantic intricacy and referential flexibility of the Qur'an, by embracing too narrow a constituent of the Arabic lexicon.

In addition to the above issues, four other intertwined concerns plague Qur'anic translations; the enduring and intractable authority from traditional tafsir: the influence of older translations, whereby translators rely heavily on other established translators and exegetes commentaries, whereby reservoir of error are accessed and reproduced: the priority and overemphasis given to a minute number of challenging words in the Qur'anic lexicon with inattention given to correlate the word to its dictionary or denotation meaning: the influence of the most common referent in the translator's language system (Esack, 2005; Cragg 1988; Rahman, 1982). Essentially the synthesis of the above four concerns have resulted in stale and inactive Qur'anic translations which has contracted the boundaries of dogmatic enclosures.

Germane to this dissertation are English and South Asian translations of the Qur'an. The most well-known and popular translations are by Ali, Arberry, Pickthal, and Asad of which Asad's is the most recent, although it was published in 1980. However it is the translation by the Indian Yusuf Ali that dominates both the South Asian and the general field of Qur'anic translation. Ali's is not a literal translation but is a paraphrasing of and commentary on the Qur'an. First published in 1932, Ali's work has been adopted as the standard for all future Sunni and Shia English translation, which is interesting as Ali himself belonged to the Shia Bohras of India. His work is marketed as the definitive Sunni work, with many imprints originating from Saudi Arabia. There was controversy surrounding the work when it was first published, including claims that his translation was a little too sympathetic to Ali and Sufism.

## Surahs and Ayats of the Qur'an

As noted earlier, the written Qur'an is not arranged in a chronological order or narrative pattern and thus does not possess a clear beginning, middle, or end. The Qur'an is composed of 114 *surahs*, literally "fence" or "row" (chapters), which are further subdivided into verses called *ayat* (literally, signs) of variable lengths. *Surahs* can be anywhere from 3 to 286 *ayats* long (Neuwirth, 2006). A collection of *ayat*, separated from each other by the occurrence of rhythm, rhyme, or assonance comprise a *surah*. As positioned in the Qur'an, the *surah* appears to mark a recited text that is reflective of the portion that is orally performed to the audience on a single event.

They *surahs* are situated in order of length, with the longest located first and the shortest last. The only exception to this is the first *surah* in the Qur'an, *al-Fatihah* (the opening), which is analogous to the Lords Prayer in Christianity. The *Fatihah* is always recited in every single obligatory prayer, and always ends with the term "Amin" (amen). Muslim theology states that Muhammad arranged the *surahs* yearly under the divine guidance of the Angel Gabriel. When Muhammad received each new *ayat*, he placed it in a specific *surah*, and made sure that his companions memorized it. The implications of this are twofold; revelation was ongoing and active and the *ayats* and *surahs* are placed in the Qur'an as they were experienced and recited by the Prophet and the early Muslim community (Esack, 2005; Calder, 1993).

The interpretation below by Miriam is instructive on many different levels. Miriam, in answer to the question of why she thought God had sent the Qur'an, narrated the following commentary:



“Allah thru *Jibreel* (Gabriel) sent it [and] made it be born. Over 23 years, slowly, slowly, slowly He sent it down. Not at a time the *Qur’an Shurib* Allah did not throw it, from the Heavens that is not how it is. I’ll give you an example. I wrote it down because it was so important. . In the *Qur’an Shurib* this is how this ayat came to be in sura Hud. Surah Hud. In the 114 ayat, its written how Allah, I mean how Allah *adiskars korse*. “She reads the Bengali translation and then proceeds to translate and de-pack it for me...” it’s saying that this person was a *shahabi* (a companion of Muhammad’s), he was a date seller, selling dates is how his life went. One day sitting in his shop when in that moment a really *shundar* lady, *rubshiki*, that means really beautiful, that’s really posh Bangla *rupiahs*. *Kobe sundari* (really beautiful) ...came to buy dates. She was such a beautiful woman you [can not] imagine. He took her into an enclosed space and kissed her. The *shahabi* for a moment he forgot... that he was a *shahabi*. He understood his [sin] after kissing her. Saytan was there, and he had cheated him. The *shahabi* realized, he sinned ...but how can he tell the prophet that he kissed some woman. He was suffering. He wanted to look big in front of *rusul* (prophet). Then the prophet said let it go, let us see what my *Rabb* (lord) says. And that is how the *Qur’an* was created. Then when the *Rusul* was reading the *Asr namaz* (afternoon prayer) this *ayat ogotani hoi* (this ayat began breathing). In the meantime Allah is all aware of what *Rusul* is saying, not saying. Allah sees everything. Allah saw that this *shahabi* came to the *rusul*, that *rusul* saying I will see what my *Rabb* will say; it was at this point this *ayat* (verse) was revealed. I didn’t write down the *ayat* but it said that anybody that did a sinful action then if they now did a *pouino kaz* (good work), then their sin would be forgiven. This how this *ayat* got joined to *surah Hud*. Little by little and by small, small small small, steps. That is how the *Qur’an Shurib* was birthed.”

The usage of the words: made it born, birthed, and slowly, slowly, slowly He sent it, really demonstrate both Miriam’s worldview, of the created *Qur’an*, its historicity, the causal nature of its revelations and the value that she placed on her position as a mother. Additionally, Miriam wrote down the meaning of the verse, which demonstrates that Muslim women are engaged in many modes of *Qur’anic* exegesis.

The commentary reinforces an important point that Arkoun foregrounds, the reification of Muhammad's companions; "the *shahabi* for a moment he forgot... he was a *shahabi*". Furthermore, Miriam did not appear to be shocked that this man was amorous with a total stranger, which again indicates the pragmatism that was displayed repeatedly in the women's interpretation of the Qur'an. I found the line "this how this line got joined to surah Hud, by small, small small," interesting since as noted above, the meaning of the word *surah* is rows and the imagery that Miriam builds is literally of a fence being constructed against Saytan with the revealed lines.

Each *surah* has a specific name, usually after a distinguishing term that appears fairly early in the *surah*, some are known by multiple names. Of the 114 *surahs*, 113 begin with the *basmalah*, which is the phrase "*Bismillah rahmanneer rahim*" (in the name of God, the gracious, and the merciful). Immediately following the *basmalah* are some disjointed Arabic letters (*al-huruf al-muqatta'at* – literally the disjointed letters), which are meaningless in a literal sense, however the *surahs* where these letters appear refer to some form of revelation (Neuwirth, 2006). Thus, it appears that the letters were a device, during the oral recitation to draw attention to the revelatory act itself. The early short *surahs* are constructed in rhymed prose called *saj*, which is succinct rhythmic diction where single phrases are marked by prose –rhyme.

### Classification of the Surahs

There are 3 *surah* classifications: early Meccan, later Meccan and the Medina *surahs*. Each period is distinguished on principles of structure, style and substance of the *surahs*. The differentiation between the three periods is not demarcated in the

Qur'an itself, as it is arranged (Robinson, 2003). The early Meccan *surahs* are sweepingly lyrical and distinguished by a hymnal quality, with very concise and potent imagery and encompass an uncommon self-referentiality. They speak explicitly to humankind and are primarily lacking in historical, political or legal features; rather their focus is on sacred space, time and human behavior therein (Neuwirth, 2006).

The Meccan material concentrates on three fundamental components of Islamic doctrine: the absolute unicity of God: the Prophethood of Muhammad; and the ultimate reckoning of all people before God on Judgment day. The inferences of the faith in these doctrines are reflected in ethno-moral decrees that are characteristic of this revelatory stage.

The later Meccan *surahs* unfurl the narrative to sacred history, didactic and illustrative stories of former prophets and are engaged with biblical recollections. References appear of convocations where scripture functions as the principal component. Sacred Symbols of the early Meccan *surahs* such as the Kabba are supplanted by new images and are occupied by biblical reminiscence (McAuliffe, 1991). The thrust of the late Meccan message aspires to broaden the mental, temporal and spatial horizon for the listener who is extracted from their regional surroundings to distant terrains.

The Medina *surahs* are reflective of Muhammad's new and unique status as a political, economic, social and military leader. They transmit the wider orbit of social, moral, legal and historical issues that the fledgling Muslim community of Mecca was struggling to address (Robinson, 2003). A fresh detail in the Medina *surahs* is reports of coeval incidents experienced by the Muslim community such as the battles of Badr and Uhud, and the expulsion of the Jewish tribe of Banu l-Nadir. A metamorphosis in idiom

takes place in the Medina *surahs*; increasingly they take on a rhetorical and polemical tone against political and religious opponents of the nascent religious and political community of Muhammad's followers (Neuwirth, 2006). Thus, the Medina *surahs* are steeped in the problems of daily life specific to the historical Islamic community in Medina.

Another category of classification that separates the *surahs* is the degree of clarity inherent in each *surah* or *ayat*. Some *ayats* and *Surahs* are explicit (*muhkamat*) while others are allegorical (*mutushabhat*). The challenge for Muslims centers on the issue of whether the allegorical *ayats* are comprehensible to humans or not. The categorical or clear *ayat* are those whose messages are explicit and thus are capable of being grasped by humans. Typically the clear *ayats* have legal implications whereas the allegorical ones are those whose meaning is opaque or incomprehensible and thus only known to God (Neuwirth, 2006).

The unknown (*mutushabhat*) *ayats* typically are concerned with the Day of Resurrection, conditions, rewards and punishments in the afterlife and knowledge of the unseen. The clear *ayats* do not require additional elucidations since their meanings cannot be distorted or perverted (*tahrif*) whereas the allegorical verses have lexical and syntactic structure that allows for multiple meanings (Robinson, 2003). However exegetes such as al-Tabari, Ibn Kathir and al-Razi promulgated that the allegorical *ayats* can be distorted (McAuliffe, 1991). Moreover they cautioned against false interpretations imbedded in them by malicious groups, with deviant hearts, who imposed a certain interpretation depending on their particular ideologies, which perverted the true meaning of the text.

Generally classical exegetes have opposed interpretations of the *mutushabhat* verses, which impose a strict restriction on esoteric or symbolic interpretations of

words, but this also bans the attempts to rationalize basic articles of faith. The dichotomy was widely debated by al-Tabari, al-Razi, al-Zamakshari and al-Suyuti. The exegetical repercussions of the allegorical (*mutushabhat*) verses affect both Shia and Sunnis interpretations of Islam albeit focusing on divergent issues; Shia doctrine states that the *mutushabhat* verses are knowable only to God, Muhammad and to their Imams (Esack, 2005).

### Themes of the Qur'an

So what are the main themes of the Qur'an, and how does the Qur'an see itself. The key and most emphatic message of the Qur'an is that God is the one transcendent creator, lord and sustainer to the exclusion of all others (Izutsu, 1959). Thus, nothing else exists except for God. His title in the Qur'an is Allah, the contraction of the Arabic al-ilah, which means "The God". God always has been, is, and always will be (Rahman, 1980). The strong belief in the unicity of God means that he does not possess an earthly form has no partner, parents, nor offspring and cannot be confined by human language. God is free from the claims that humans ascribe to him. The most heinous and the only unforgivable crime in the Qur'an is the attachment of shared divinity with God:

Say: " He is the One God;  
God the eternal, the Uncaused Cause of all being  
He begets not, and neither is he begotten;  
And there is nothing that could be compared to Him"

(112.1-4) (Translated by Asad. 1980)

Just as God gives life, he also causes death and resurrects the dead. He is merciful and has a tendency to forgive rather than condemn. The Qur'an sees itself

ultimately as a guide and a remembrance of Gods grace and forgiveness to humanity (Rahman, 1980; Robinson, 2003). God has granted humanity life and there is a profound connection between faith (*iman*) and gratitude (*skukr*). The Qur'an strongly emphasizes the binding relationship between righteous conduct (*a'mal al-salihah*) and faith (*iman*).

“The strongest tie of semantic relationship binds *'amal al-salih* (righteous conduct) and *iman* (faith) together into an almost inseparable unit. Just as the shadow follows the form, wherever there is *iman* there is *salihat*...so much so that we may feel justified in defining the former in terms of the latter and the latter expressed in terms of the former.”

Izutsu, 1964:171).

Although classical exegetes interpreted righteous conduct as the rituals of reified Islam, the Qur'an itself does not attach any preconditions to righteousness. It emphatically declares that even minute degrees of righteous will be rewarded in the afterlife (Esack: 147). It is interesting that the Qur'an declares that as a Judge God will weigh people's deeds, rather than take each sin individually, which again shows the merciful nature of God. In order to explore the dogmatic enclosures placed on the Qur'an, we need to open up its temporal history as Arkoun urges and compare it to the a-temporal narrative that Muslims understand of their sacred book.

### The Narrative of Prophet Muhammad's Life

The normative story of Muhammad, the revelation and establishment of Islam is found in a myriad of catechism materials, and Islamic history books. In this section I will relate the normative story as told in the above mentioned material, interviewing with some of the narratives from the study participants. This narrative will be

compared with a narration of Miriam's. According to Islam, Muhammad Ibn Abdullah was born on the 12<sup>th</sup> of Rab'u al-awwal in the trading town of Mecca. He was a member of the Hashim clan and part of the Quraysh tribe. Besides trade, Mecca's largest hold on the Arabian Peninsula was the Kaaba, which is a square structure that was originally built by Adam and subsequently rebuilt by Abraham and Ishmael. However during the era of Muhammad's birth the Kaaba was dedicated to the Syrian high god Hubel and housed 360 images, including figures of Jesus and the Virgin Mary (Rodinson, 1971; Armstrong, 1993; Aslan, 2005; Ramadan, 2008). Encased at the far end of the structure is a black stone, initially white, which fell along with Adam, from Paradise. This stone has the power to cleanse a person's sins, but after the brush of billions of hands has turned it black. A sacred structure, encompassed within the holy land of Mecca, the Kabba drew people from all over Arabia (Armstrong, 1993).

Mecca was deeply polytheist; its trade was goods, religions and hedonism. This is what Muslims refer to as the Jahilyia. Poppy paints how Muslims view the era

Now society has changed, outlook but then it was Jahilyia  
*jooge Agoro jooge* (earlier uncouth age) I mean they couldn't  
understand anything. But now, illiterate days are no more.  
In the Jahilyia *jooge*, no one was educated.

A despised word in Islam, Jahilyia connotes a time and mindset where God and man were forsaken, where man only lived for himself, his pleasure and only for this life and this moment. Totally godless the Jahilyia society frequently made use of female infanticide as a mode of population control, men conducted limitless polygamous marriages, women and slaves were considered to be just chattels and thus possessed no legal or human rights, no rights existed for widows and orphans were routinely forcibly married to their guardians, who squandered their inheritances (Armstrong, 1993).

The Quraysh tribe ruled Mecca and was rich as a consequence of being the “keepers of the key”. This sinecure gave the tribe monopoly over the Kaaba and to the well of Zamzam, a spring that bubbled forth nearby (Lings, 1983). Tara, very eloquently told me the story of the Zamzam well, which I have paraphrased, in the next couple of sentences. When Abraham’s wife Sara was finally blessed with a child, intense jealousy propelled her to demand the expulsion of Abraham’s other wife, the Egyptian Hajar, mother of his first-born son Ishmael. Taking both mother and child into the desert of Arabia, Abraham left them in the valley of Becca.

Can you imagine what that must have been like for her, for them? Why did she put up with it? To be left there, with nothing, no resources to give her child. Anyway, time stood still as Hajar watched her small child crying and slowly dying of thirst, knowing that it was only a matter of time before he succumbed to the heat, dust and thirst and died. You have kids, what would you have done? Frantic and impotent with grief she rushed fruitlessly around the desert looking for water. Hajar ran seven times between the mountains of Safaa and Marwa desperately trying to locate water. My parents went on Hajj, and that run between the two mountains, they said it was really hard for them. It’s covered now so can you imagine what that must have been like for her? Anyway, God took pity on her tears and sent the angel Gabriel, to tap his spear near Ishmael’s feet where the water of Zamzam bubbled forth. Her tears of joy must have mixed with the tears of frustration and rage

Some parts of the hajj are for her, for Hajar I mean. I don’t think people know that. They think we do some of the stuff [because] it’s what they did before, or God, after Islam came [and] told us to perform it...a speaker came to our mosque and said that it [the hajj] was to remember Abraham...But its not all about him, God put something of her in there...I think he understood some of her pain, the sacrifices she made...No, I don’t think that guys necessarily understand or care. If you were to bring it up, they would say [but] that’s a small part of it. It [the hajj] is about the man Abraham.



Abraham proceeded to visit Hajar and Ishmael in the valley of Becca, where he and Ishmael rebuilt and consecrated God's house, the Kaaba. Muslims commemorate Hajar desperate search for water by running between the Mountains of Safa and Marwa seven times during the Hajj rites. Obviously the well of Zamzam held the key to life in the inhospitable desert environment; whoever held Zamzam held Mecca (Armstrong, 1993).

Before he was born, Muhammad, the son of Abdallah Ibn al-Muttalib and Amina bint Wahib was already an orphan. Abdallah died when Amina was six months pregnant with Muhammad. During her pregnancy Amina saw a light emanating from her stomach and heard a voice proclaim that the child in her belly was the lord of the Arabs. As was customary, Muhammad was fostered out to a Bedouin mother, Halima bint Abu Dhuayab. Miraculous events occurred whilst Muhammad was amongst Halima's family; milk, both Hakim's and the family goats overflowed, and the Bedouin family prospered. One day two angels clothed in white took out young Muhammad's heart, and before replacing it, washed away all the impurities with fresh white snow. They also weighed the little boy on a pair of scales and declared that he was heavier than all the Arabs combined (Rodinson, 1971; Lings, 1983; Armstrong, 1993; Aslan, 2005; Ramadan, 2008).

Amina died when Muhammad was six; orphaned yet again he went to live with his grandfather, Abu Mutalib, the chief of the Hashim clan. When the old man died two years later, Muhammad moved yet again this time to the house of his uncle Abu Talib, the new chief of the Hashim clan. Whilst traveling to Syria with his uncle's trading caravan, Muhammad encountered Bahira, a Christian monk. As the caravan moved along the hot desert Bahira noticed that a cloud moved accordingly to shade a particular camel and its rider. The monk invited the traders to dinner, where he saw the

special mark of the prophet (the seal of the prophets) between young Muhammad's shoulder blades whereby Bahira declared that Muhammad was the long awaited prophet. The monk cautioned Muhammad to stay away from the Jews (Rodinson, 1971; Lings, 1983; Armstrong, 1993; Aslan, 2005; Ramadan, 2008).

At age twenty-five Muhammad impressed a distant cousin so much with his integrity and honesty that she proposed marriage to him. A twice widowed, wealthy woman of forty, Khadija bint Khuwajlid was an extraordinary woman whose unwavering emotional and financial support of her husband changed history. For the twenty or more years that Khadija was alive, she was Muhammad's only wife, bearing him eight children. Muhammad's life changed inextricably after his marriage to Khadija; he took in his young cousin Ali, adopted a slave boy named Zaid, and was able to leave Mecca periodically for the Mountain caves of Hira to mediate on life's malaises (Armstrong, 1993).

One night during the month of Ramadan 610 CE, when Muhammad was forty years old, he heard a voice in the cave of Mount Hira. The voice proclaimed:

Recite in the name of thy Lord who created!  
He creatheth man from a clot of blood.  
Recite: and thy Lord is the most Bountiful  
He who hath taught by the pen  
Taught man what he knew not.  
(96:1-5)

(Translated by Asad, 1980).

Petrified Muhammad ran outside but everywhere he saw the towering and frightful figure of the angel Gabriel engulfing the vast landscape. Fearing that he was loosing his mind, Muhammad raced home and crawled unto Khadija lap "cover me, cover me" exclaimed a terrified Muhammad. Khadija, convinced that Muhammad had been approached by God took him to her Christian cousin Waraqa Ibn Naufal, who informed Muhammad that he was the long awaited prophet of the Arab people.

Muhammad began to preach quietly initially to his intimate family, then to his friends and finally to the wider Meccan population. His first convert was Khadija, then his young cousin Ali, and his dear friend Abu-Bakr. Other early converts were Uthman Ibn Affan and Umar ibn al- Khattab; all three men would go on to be first “rightly guided” or *Rashidun* Caliphs of Islam after Muhammad’s death (Rodinson, 1971; Lings, 1983; Armstrong, 1993; Aslan, 2005; Ramadan, 2008).

However, Muhammad’s central message that there was no other God but God, thus all other gods must be forsaken, and that he, Muhammad was God’s messenger enraged Meccan society. They accused Muhammad of attacking their traditions, and the gods that their forefathers had worshiped. Meccan leaders laughed and cruelly mocked, persecuted, economically and socially blockaded Muhammad and the new converts. Life became increasingly difficult and perilous for the Muslims. Fearing for their lives, Muhammad sent many of the new converts to Abyssinia to petition for asylum from the Christian Negus.

During this period, Khadija and Abu Talib, the two people who had served as Muhammad’s central emotional and physical supports died. Another of Muhammad’s uncle, Abu Lahab, who was virulently opposed to the Muslims assumed the mantle of chief of the tribe. He revoked tribal protection for Muhammad and urged other tribal leaders to take similar action for the Muslim members of their tribes (Rodinson1971; Lings, 1983; Armstrong, 1993; Aslan, 2005; Ramadan, 2008). The aberrant and abominable implications of Abu Lahab’s betrayal can be felt in the proclamation that God makes about him and his wife in the Qur’an; the surah is unusual in that it names Abu Lahab as a specific enemy of Muhammad, since the Qur’an hardly ever names contemporaries of a few historical figures by name.

Broken be the hands of Abu Lahab  
And may he break  
His wealth and all that he acquired  
Will not save him  
He will be swallowed in fire  
And his spouse, the wood carrier  
Around her neck a rope of palm  
(111: 1-5)  
(Translated by Asad, 1980).

Farzana stressed the hijra (the migration) portion of Muhammad's story.

The hijra is the immigration of the new Muslim community to Yathrib. She said, "It must have been hard for him and so sad. He was leaving behind all those that he knew. Yes it was exciting to go to a new place, and they had done really despicable things to him. But still, he could not go back for a long time to visit Khadija's grave. He must have wondered if he would ever return home.

Relief came in the form of an offer from the oasis town of Yathrib. The endless cycle of blood feud and infighting had taken its toll and the citizens wanted peace. They made Muhammad an offer he could not refuse; they would take in Muhammad and the Muslims, converting to Islam themselves if Muhammad agreed to be their leader and arbitrator. Muhammad quickly agreed, evacuating the Muslims to Yathrib slowly so as not to arouse the suspicions of the Meccans. Only Muhammad, Abu Bakr and Ali remained behind. Upon discovering the situation the Meccans were so enraged that they plotted to kill Muhammad that very night. But when they came to carry out the deed, they discovered a defiant Ali standing in for Muhammad under the bed sheets.

In Yathrib, all the communities' swore alliance to Muhammad; however it soon became apparent that neither the Jewish tribes nor the echelon of Yathrib's elite were genuine in their support of Muhammad. They lied and colluded with the Meccans, directly aiding them when they attacked Yathrib. After numerous treacherous betrayals and attempts at reconciliation was rebuffed, the men of the most treacherous Jewish

tribe was put to death according to Rules of Yathrib and whilst the rest of Jewish tribes were banished (Armstrong, 1993).

Two great battles were fought by the Muslims and the Meccans; Badar and Uhud. Badar is seen as a *furqan*, or a sign of salvation from God, since it divided the just from the unjust. Badar was the turning point for the Muslim community; the angels fought along side the small Muslim army to defeat the Meccans, who outnumbered the Muslims four to one. However the next battle at Uhud demonstrated to the Muslims the repercussions of forsaking God; an erroneous battle cry went up that Muhammad had been wounded and had died. Men panicked and deserted the field, thus allowing the Meccans to decimate the remaining Muslims. The Meccan army and its female followers engaged in deplorable attacks on the dead; Hind, wife of Abu Sufyan ripped out the liver of Muhammad's uncle Hamzah and devoured it with (Rodinson, 1971; Lings, 1983; Armstrong, 1993; Aslan, 2005).

As more and more of the Arabs heard the beauty and truth of the Qur'an, they converted to Islam. The pagan Meccans and their allies came to realize that God and the Qur'an had triumphed. The Muslims marched to Mecca where they entered peacefully. Muhammad cleansed the Kabba of the idols, and granted the Meccans amnesty; they all took the Shahada, declaring, "There is no God but God and that Muhammad is his messenger". On Mount Arafat Muhammad preached his farewell sermon, where he reminded Muslims that they were a community, brothers in spirituality, the ummah, and as such they should deal justly with each other, forsake blood feuds, and treat women kindly.

Muhammad died in 632, in his wife Aisha's chamber. He was buried in underneath Aisha's room, as was customary. Umar refused to believe that Muhammad was dead but Abu Bakr proclaimed, "Oh men, if anyone worships Muhammad, know

that Muhammad is dead. If anyone worships God, God is alive, immortal”.

Muhammad’s death was one of the most perilous challenges that faced the fledgling Muslim community. However the ummah quickly coalesced around the four rightly guided Caliphs, Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman and Ali, who ushered in a golden age of Islam (Rodinson, 1971; Lings, 1983; Aslan, 2005; Ramadan, 2008).

The above narrative is fascinating its incorporation of several biblical mythical motifs. The Qur’an expresses divine revelations as a series of temporal disclosures intended for specific peoples. However it also places itself as the continuation of a line of scriptures in the Abrahamic tradition. The prophet(s) who are analogous to Muhammad and who are meant to inspire and provide comfort to Muhammad in his Prophethood are Abraham and Moses, whose stories fill the Qur’an. Thus in composing the lineage of Muhammad the mapping back to Abraham, Ishmael and the Kaaba is extremely important. Additionally the narrative of the two angels in white echoes the angel’s visit to Abraham and Sara to prophecies the continuation of their line and the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary. Furthermore the orphan status of Muhammad harkens back to Moses position with the house of the Pharaoh, a prince but also an outcast.

I want to compare the above “semi-orthodox” biography of Muhammad’s life to the commentary below by Miriam:

I had Islamic studies until class 8. His family was [very] big in Mecca. His fathers name was Abdullah. His granddad’s name was Abu Mutalib; he dreamt that the Prophet was coming, that Abdullah would have a son. His mother’s name was Amina and Amina dreamt he was coming. She dreamt of all the prophets, coming up to her and saying “congratulations, congratulations”. When he was born the world said *la illah ha illah...* (The declaration of Muslim faith)

The whole room became white. And some of Mecca's buildings proclaimed *allahu Akbar* (Allah is Great). Before Muhammad's birth his father died. His mom and dad were coming from somewhere and on the way something happened and his father died. Where he died that's where they buried him. After his birth, his mother gave him away. Why [did] she gave him to Halima, I cannot understand it. After he was given to Halima he used to live in a tribe. Halima's home was far away from Mecca, really far, so far that ice used to fall [there]. That sort of *obsasta* (situation). I don't know why his mom sent him there. I think he was with Bibi Halima for five years, he wasn't there long. Within those five years he went to go play in the field. Then suddenly from somewhere some *lok* (people) called him, they made him unconscious, and then they ripped open his chest and then they washed his heart. He was never angry in his life; they took away all his anger and they got rid off lots of other things. They moved away his anger, that why he didn't have any anger. Because Allah lifted it up. How could he be such a good otherwise? He such a good man, because of Allah, we have *ragg* (anger) inside us, but Allah lifted it up and took away his *ragg* by cutting his chest. All the bad stuff inside him they cut it all out, they kept all the good things, and in fact they put in more of the good things. So he had an operation. After Bibi Halima found about it, she got frightened... There was this famous, rich businesswoman called Bibi Khadija, I don't know how but slowly they had a business discussion, they used to *talk* have contact about business. Bibi Khadija *ounar prem a poreh* (fell in love with him), then a proposal came from Bibi Khadija, He was so beautiful! I mean his social culture; in his young age. Muhammad was so beautiful you can't put it into words. He was so beautiful, what they call a handsome boy. He loved Bibi Khadija. He also did a lot of romantic things with her, *ohneck romantic korse*, (did a lot of romantic things) and Allah said that romantic *tumra korrawa* (do it). Allah sent the prophet for us to follow him), so we could learn from him, there's no thing that he didn't do. With Bibi Aisha, he made her tea and she drank it. By this time his mother died, his *chacha* (father's brother) Abu Talib took care of him, so his *chacha*, when the proposal came to him, Bibi Khadija age was forty years, the *rusul* age was twenty-five. Whether this marriage will happen or not happen, Abu Talib didn't think *My batezia's boishesh 25 ar maer boysh 40 ayta hobi na* (my nephews age is 25, and the girls 40, this will marriage will not happen). I will let the marriage proceed. *Prem hosey korthey deo* (they fell in love, I will let them). So they got married. They got married and then Bibi Khadija always took care of him, she was very happy with her husband, she

used to love him so much. They were really really happy. They were each other's best friends. Then one day he would often in the evening time go to Hera, and would think; what is the sky, where did the birds come from, where does the sun rise from, where do the stars come from? He used to think about all sort of stuff. He would end up in cave, *gorthu*; (hole) a *coup* that's what they call it, in Hera. Hera is a really big mountain, I've been there, and to get up there it takes an hour. He would sit there and think what this world is. He used to think about everything. Bibi Khadija she used to take him *bath* (rice/food). She would climb the mountain taking three hours in all, she would climb this mountain and bring him food, because he wouldn't go home, maybe he did go once in a while, he would all the time think, think, about everything. Then one day Allah sent Jibreel, he was thinking and Jibreel came, the description is that there is so much wind in Jibreel body, so much power, that *rusul* after seeing Jibreel was trembling with fear. Then Jibreel said "don't be afraid" you read, in the name of your God read, but then in his fear he wanted to run, but Jibreel held him, held him and sat him down and told him you read, in the name of your God read, after saying it a couple of times, Muhammad said, I can't read, I can't write. Then he ran down the mountain and ran to Khadija and cried "I'm afraid, wrap me up in blankets and bring me close to you, my whole body is trembling, and I don't know what I just saw in the cave." I think that Jibreel held him and squeezed him. He said to Khadija, in the *got how* I was so afraid, and what did I see? Bibi Khadija had a brother, the brother name was Waraka, so Khadija went and said Muhammad went there today, was afraid and this is what happened. When he heard, the brother said he said array (O.K) I know what that is it is Jibreel, and this Muhammad he is the *shesh nabi* (last prophet), He told Bibi Khadija keep him carefully because if the other *Kafir* (unbelievers) saw him they would kill him. They know that the *shesh nabi* (last prophet) will come. Who the *shesh nabi* is they don't know if they can understand who he is they will kill him, do you understand?

I asked Miriam the following question:

Do you think that Bibi Khadija was forty years old?  
Since she had 7-8 children?

Miriam replied:



I don't know; the marriage was at forty years of age. That's what was written in the history books... She has seven children? All the seven children were Bibi Khadija? Bibi Aisha's didn't have any children... No children at all? But she was young and she didn't have children and the forty years old lady she had children? Maybe, maybe, she wasn't that old...

Miriam's commentary is enfolded in multifold layers; her own position as a mother, a child who lost parents at a young age, a migrant, a wife, and a woman all make an appearance in her exegesis. Miriam lost her parents at a young age, and her commentary dwells on the orphan status. However, it is her position as a loving mother that makes an interesting comment; her bewilderment at the foster out or the sending away of Muhammad by Amina. It is difficult for Miriam to understand. The imagery that she applies creates a pensive atmosphere. There is great distance, and ice. The usage of ice and the connections to coldness as opposed to the deserts heat may be reflective of the shock that Miriam felt after leaving Bangladesh for England. Miriam expressed numerous times that she loves Bangladesh, and although she now is not fond of extreme heat, the cold is not her friend either.

As a woman in her mid-sixties the five years that Muhammad spent with Halima does not seem like a long period. Other participants commented that it was a long time for Muhammad to be away from his home and mother. Dreams in Islam are traditionally considered to be very meaningful. Miriam, herself had many books on dream interpretations, and thus her references to the heralding dreams of Amina and Abu Mutalib are notable.

The way that Miriam represents Muhammad is arresting. Rather than the austere, pious prophet/statesman/ warrior, we now see him as a young man in love, a devoted husband, whose strength emanates from his spouse. Miriam also does not portray Muhammad as a totally perfect human being. Although she does not criticize

him in any way and holds him up as an example of a true male, she makes us aware that his near perfect manner and praxis are the result of divine intervention. Whereas the official literature focuses on the washing away of the impurities in Muhammad, Miriam's telling highlights the human emotion of anger. The reason that Muhammad was lacking in anger in later life was that it was taken out of him; not that he was always a perfect human. The narrative states that not only were things taken out but also supposedly goodness was put into Muhammad, which allowed him to be so good. Miriam attempts to understand why Muhammad was so perfect and perhaps come to terms the axiom that no mere human can actually meet Muhammad's praxis.

The main focus of Miriam's narrative settles on the relationship between Muhammad and his wife Khadija. It is interesting that a woman whose own marriage was arranged and whose culture views arranged marriage as the normative marriage form would so valorize love, and the courtship between Muhammad and his first wife. The tale of the Qur'an's revelation is woven around this relationship. Miriam is very much the center of her family, a woman given to cooking beautiful Bengali meals. Love is demonstrated by food in Miriam's household. Khadija also demonstrates her love for Muhammad by undergoing an extensive climb up mount Hera to deliver food to her husband Muhammad. Lastly, Miriam's narrative is reflective of the actual physical closeness that a man and woman have; in the midst of divine revelation Muhammad utters the words "bring me close to you".

Miriam's narration also references the theory of supercessionism, when she refers to Muhammad as the *shesh nabi* (last prophet). In the exchange between Miriam and me one can see exegetical movement in her comments. Utilizing her experiences as a mother, Miriam rationalizes and demonstrates openness to shifting

theological concepts that may not have occurred to her before, due to a lack of certain information.

### Sources of Muhammad's Biography

How do Muslims get their knowledge of Muhammad and his companions? The Qur'an itself is not very helpful and provides only fragmentary accounts of his life. A notable foundation for the Muslim perspective on history, both of the world and Muhammad emanates from the Sira. Sometimes erroneously called the biography of the Prophet Muhammad, the Sira is a scholarly category that evolved from historical stories of Muhammad's life and Prophethood. Encompassing narratives of Muhammad's life, his Prophethood, his companions, and tales of earlier prophets, the Sira chronicles history from the creation to Muhammad's era, as well as incorporating discourses on Qur'anic exegesis (Rahman, 1980). The Sira has become the basis for all historical inquiry into Muhammad's life and over time has acquired the status of sacred history.

Sira material arose out of the narratives performed by the Qissa, who were storytellers and preachers who gained legitimacy and prestige under the Umayyad dynasty. The Umayyad caliphs granted official permission to the Qissa to perform and lecture in the mosques. Via the performative and entertaining storytelling mode, the Qissa interpreted, delineated, illustrated, and recounted the life of Muhammad and that of his prophecy (McAuliffe, 2006). The narratives underpinnings of the Qissa histories were acquired from both Rabbinical, biblical and non-biblical sources.

However after the Umayyad dynasty fell to the Abbasids, royal patronage of the Qissa was revoked. The Qissa's fall from royal favor directly correlates to the rise of the

*ulema* (religious class); the Abbasids accession to the caliphate was legitimized by the *ulema*, which were in direct competition with the *Qissa* to edify, and codifying the Qur'an, and Islam. The *Qissa* and their narratives have significant repercussions for Qur'anic exegesis and Islam; their stories, embellishments and all steeped into the *Sira*, *tafsir* and Muslim culture.

The most famous, important and influential *Sira* is by Ibn Ishaq (d. 150/767), which no longer exists in book form but comes to us in the editions of Ibn Hisham (d. 213/ 828) and al-Tabari (McAuliffe, 2006). The Abbasid caliph al-Mansur (136-58) commissioned Ibn Ishaq to write an extensive history book from the creation of Adam to the present day. Commissioned by the Abbasids the *Sira* in many respects was utilized as a direct and subtle tool of Abbasid propaganda. Scholars think that substantial parts of the *Sira* emerged as a direct response to the bible, apocrypha and exegetical traditions of Jews and Christians (McAuliffe, 2006). Moreover, *Sira* narrative was deeply influenced by *isra'iliyyat* material, which is exegesis information that originated from Jewish and biblical sources. The *isra'iliyyat* was extensively applied by Muslim exegetes to flesh out narrative details to lore that were familiar to the Bible and the Qur'an (Wild, 1996). A portion of the body of the *isra'iliyyat* was transmitted by Jewish converts to Islam such as Ka'b al-Akhbar who passed on numerous oral Jewish traditions that were assimilated into the Islamic narrative (Motzki, 2004). *Isra'iliyyat* are problematic as an exegetical tool since they incorporated cultural value into the Qur'anic material that originally may have been absent from the meta narrative text. Material from the early oral narratives, including the *Qissa* narratives and prevalent historical accounts were incorporated into Ibn Ishaq's 3 volumes of *Sira* (Guillaume, 1987).

The organization and structure of the *Sira* does not conform to western ideas of text; sometimes the structure is arranged chronologically, whilst other times it arranged

by subject matter (Motzki, 2004). Editing was constantly applied to the Sira material and the text went through three editors. The Sira is preoccupied with its own theological purity, however since extensive editing was applied to the text, questions arise as to the nature of the material added and deleted during the editing process (McAuliffe, 2006). Ibn Ishaq does not include the incidence of the “satanic verses” whilst al-Tabari freely addresses it. Also Ibn Hisham apparently abbreviated, annotated and sometimes altered Ibn Ishaq’s text (Guillaume: 1987) Additionally the Sira literature is not concerned generally with validation, like the hadith through the chain of transmitters (*isnads*) (Motzki, 2004; McAuliffe, 2006).

### The Shift of the Qur’an from Oral to Written Form

How did the Qur’an go from an oral entity to a written document?

During Muhammad’s lifetime the Qur’an was memorized by expert reciters (including Muhammad’s wives). Muslims believe that the Qur’an was written down in its entirety at Muhammad’s death. A *Mushaf* or official recension was undertaken during the rule of the 3rd Caliph, Uthman. Islamic historiography and theology explains that the official recension was necessary as death claimed the lives of a majority of the expert reciters; the community feared that the Qur’an would be forever lost (Esack, 2005). However, after Muhammad’s death people began to write down divergent versions of the Qur’an, which propelled Uthman to have the Qur’an compiled. These non canonical Qur’an’s were not approved and were subsequently understood to be mere personal copies of some companions of the Prophet. Moreover, with the codification of the *Mushaf*, only one reading was retained and legitimized. Many scholars perceive this move as a

device to gain legitimacy and wrest control of political power by Uthman, and other companions of Muhammad.

The shift of the Qur'an from an essentially oral discourse to a written one had profound effects upon members of Muhammad's immediate family, the succession question, the egalitarian voice of Islam, and on women in general. I will address these issues later on. Islamic consensus and doctrine thus contends that the present rendition of the Qur'an is the sole authentic one, which was read during the prophethood of Muhammad.

Non Muslim scholars (Crone and Cook, 1977, Wansbrough, 1977) believe instead that the Qur'an evolved gradually over a two hundred year stretch and that the Islamic narrative traditions are de facto examples of salvation history. What these non Muslim western scholars are theorizing is that the generative narrative of Islam was fabricated in a later era and projected backwards in history to serve contemporary social-cultural and political requirements.

While I do not agree with the above scholars, there are some problematic issues pertaining to the official account of the Qur'an's recension. The modern Arabic script was not perfected until the ninth century, which means that the Qur'an was written in a script which lacked two important text markers present in modern Arabic; diacritical marks, that identifies consonants and vowelling marks which indicate prolongation and absent vowels (Esack, 2005). The unfinished script complication is further compounded by the belief that the Qur'an was revealed in seven "modes" (Cragg, 1988). The implications of both issues suggest that the early Muslims understood the Qur'an and its meaning to be multifaceted and dynamic. This suggests the codification of the Qur'an to its written form allowed for the boundaries of dogmatic enclosures to be enacted.

The concept of legitimate diverse readings has real significance for Qur'anic exegesis. I posit that this was a critical juncture for the consolidation of legitimacy, power, and the emergence of authority of the male dominated ulema, and the negation or *Awrah* (taboo) of agency, voice, space, and legitimacy for women in formalized / orthodox Islam. Furthermore, this crossroad saw the devaluation of the oral knowledge produced by women, who earlier were considered experts via their proximity to Muhammad and their proficiency of the oral Qur'an. The movement from oral to written Qur'an effectively denied Muslim women voice and agency in the production of Qur'anic exegesis and space within formalized Islam.

### The Mihnah and the Entrenchment of Orthodoxy

In addition to its written codification the Qur'an's character underwent a metamorphosis during the *Mihnah* (court of Inquiry). The Mu'tazilites called themselves "the people of divine unity and justice (*ahl a-tawhid wa'l-adl*). They were a dominant Baghdad based, theological school in the third and fourth centuries of the Muslim era, whose use of Hellenistic philosophical methodology resulted in the development of major dogma (Rahman, 1982). The Mu'tazilites aligned themselves with and cooperated with the Abbasid dynasty; there were numerous repercussions stemming from this alliance. During the height of Mu'tazilite political and public power, the movement displayed great doctrinal diversity. However in 833 the Abbasid Caliph al-Ma'mun introduced the *Mihnah* (court of Inquiry), which instituted harsh punitive actions against those who did not accept the Mu'tazilites concept of the created

Qur'an. A direct consequence of Mu'tazilites state repression manifested itself in a hitherto unknown degree of rigidity, the entrenchment of the traditionalists, and a creation of orthodoxy.

The Mu'tazilites, like all theological schools understood the Qur'an to be the primary miracle, validating the prophethood of Muhammad.

Their uncompromising interpretation of God's unity (*tawhid*) led to their belief in the created nature of the Qur'an; created in the sense of its temporality. According to the principle of *tawhid* God is an absolute unity and therefore cannot be composed of a part which then follows that there cannot be anything that is co-equal with him. Therefore the Qur'an, the speech of God (*Kalam Allah*), cannot possibly be co-eternal with God but must necessarily have been created in time and that advocating that the Qur'an was simultaneously co-eternal with God negated God's unity (Rahman, 1982). The Mihnah and the Mu'tazilites strident promotion on the createdness of the Qur'an resulted in the traditionalists, under the influence of Ahmad b. Hanbal associating their rejection of the createdness of the Qur'an with the affirmation of its eternity.

In the pre- Mihnah era, discourse concerning the essence of the Qur'an was not perceived as a question of its eternity versus its temporality. The dialogue revolved around the issue of whether God speaks in a literal sense i.e. whether the Qur'an is the speech of God, as the advocates of an anthropomorphic concept of God believed, or whether God creates the sounds which can be heard and does not talk in a literal sense (Esack, 2005). Implicit in both positions is the temporal nature of the Qur'an. The Mu'tazilites accepted both concepts, that God speaks and that the Qur'an is actually the articulation of God. However, Mu'tazilites theology states that the differentiation between divine and human speech is that God as a consequence of his omnipotence does not require instruments to produce speech (Rahman, 1980; 1982). By



the eighth century the traditionalists' discourse had gained supremacy and the Mu'tazilites movement and much of their progressive philosophy was reduced to a heretical fringe. It is interesting that a rationalist approach to the Qur'an was rejected because the Mu'tazilites tried to impose these values by force and so created a backlash.

The Mihnah and the fall of the Mu'tazilites had enormous repercussions for Qur'anic exegesis and doctrine. The orthodox/traditionalists stance stressed an inflexibility that was foreign to Muslim discourse pre Mihnah, with theological opinion that the Qur'an is uncreated but an occurrence that originated in time being condemned as heresy (Esack, 2005). Moreover, prior to the Mihnah the Qur'an createdness was not viewed as corresponding with its temporality. But the post Mihnah era saw "created" becoming synonymous with "temporal" and "uncreated" as "co-eternal with God". Thus the belief that the Qur'an was an end product was itself now suspect as was the historicity of its being. The doctrine of the Qur'an uncreatness, its immutability, its ahistorical nature and its position as the literal Word of God Qur'an all arose during a dynamic interaction with the human processes (McAuliffe, 2006).

### Discussion

This section examined how orthodox Islamic theology views the Qur'an and The prevalent view that all Muslims adhere strictly to these doctrines. What this chapter has shown is that there are contestation, ambiguity and negotiation inherent in the everyday exegesis of many of these doctrines. That vernacular Muslim women of the South Asian diaspora are performing exegesis is clear. The women's commentary in this section manifests their capacities to think, feel, desire and use *ijtihad* (independent reasoning). However this interpretation is not just a replication of earlier exegesis but

shows a convergence of interpretative multiplicity. This condition may speak to the fragmentation of religious authority inherent in non-majority Muslim environments.

## CHAPTER 5

### Qur'anic Methodology and Exegetes.

Farzana

We can see from the last chapter that Muslims revere the Qur'an as the Word of God and believe that it has been transmitted and codified free of error. Orthodoxy frames Islam as a perfected consummate, total system put in place in Medina by the Prophet Muhammad. Existing in tandem with this belief is the tradition of the "infallibility" of classical medieval interpreters and the binding nature of their Qur'anic exegesis (Arkoun, 1994). The idea that traditional scholars and their exegesis are sacred is buttressed by orthodoxy's assumption that as these exegetes were closer to the Prophet and the perfect Muslim community in Medina in real time, their commentaries

duplicated Muhammad's own interpretive process (Barlas, 2002). Moreover, Muslim orthodoxy has framed a discourse where these interpretations are definitive, authoritative, profane and transcendent. What orthodoxy glosses over is the manner that cultural assumptions seep into classical exegesis. However Talal Asad states that;

“Divine texts may be unalterable but the ingenuities of human interpretation are endless”

(Asad, 1993:236)

### Farzana

Farzana, an electrical engineer had come to the United States as a graduate student. Both she and her husband had applied to the same universities to carry out their PhD work. Farzana's parents were both professionals; her father had been an engineering professor whilst her mother was an elementary teacher. She had met Sammy, her husband at BUET (Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology) and *prem hoysi* (love happened). Farzana explained that no-one in Bangladesh had arranged marriages now. Upon my surprise she clarified the situation. According to Farzana, middle class and upper middle class men and women generally formed a romantic attachment at university. Parents usually put a good face on it and at the marriage ceremony; everyone is always told that it is an arranged marriage. Furthermore, Farzana stated that while some parents were initially upset, the overwhelming majority were relieved not to go through all the rigmarole of finding a suitable boy or girl. In my own extended family, this an analysis generally rings true. Although when I pressed Farzana further she conceded that “of course, *gramar lok* (villagers) still had arranged marriages’.

Farzana explained that she always knew that she would be either an engineer or a doctor, because as she put it “*ayeta tau shob baba maa chai, thai na?*” (That’s what all moms and dads want, isn’t that so?). In Bangladesh, most parents do aspire to have their children join these two professional ranks. Her brother is an engineer, whilst her younger sister is a doctor in the United States. Farzana had been very close to her father, who had pushed all his children academically. However, Farzana felt that her parents had stressed more for their daughter than their son. “They pushed for the PhD. Why would I not do it? It is interesting that Farzana’s parents never appeared to entertain the notion that their daughters may not intellectually up to the challenge.

Farzana’s parents were “not obsessive about *namaz* (prayer). Farzana’s father prayed on Fridays sometimes, but always on *Eid* and her mother prayed “regularly, but “not dogmatically”. Farzana herself attempts to pray five times a day. If she cannot make any of her prayers on time she makes them up in the evening. Farzana’s mother often visited Sufi shrines. She liked the atmosphere, and it took her back to memories of her younger self, when she would visit her grandparents in the village and hear traveling Sufi singers (Bauls). Farzana indicated that she had seen a large amount of Bangladesh as a direct consequence of her parents trips to see different *mazaras* (Sufi shrines). The one that impacted her personally was the mazara for Shah Jahal, who Bengalis believe was responsible for bringing Islam to Bengal. Farzana told me a story that her mother had told her regarding the *mazara* (Sufi shrines). She began by declaring that

When the sun sets on the mazara (Sufi shrines), on the *pookoor* (pond) it looks as if the whole *pookoor* (pond) is on fire. The water is very calm but the way the sun sets on it, it gives the illusion of flames leaping from the water. There are big *rhui mass* (carp fish) in the pond, an incredible number of them. You cannot see the water just the swarming fish.

Probably, what occurs is that the rays hit the water and the fish scales to create the spectacle of the fire leaping off the water. I am a rational person but when you stand there and watch the show, for it is a show, much better than any special effects. It catches your breath...you know that no one catches or eats the fish right. They are guarding Shah Jalal. They are his warriors, just like the sufi warriors he brought with him to Bengal...yes, in a such a poor country, everyone leaves the fish alone...So this doctor, who was stationed in Sylhet near the *mazar* (sufi shrines), he loved *rhui mass* (carp fish) and can you imagine the fellows despair at seeing all the mass and not being able to eat it. So he made a plan. He came back in the middle of the night and just picked up three fish from the *pookoor* (pond) ...His tongue was getting long with the desire to eat the fish. He [could not] wait. So there in the middle of the night he began to fry up the fish on the cooker. The cooker exploded and they found him the next day, dead...it probably is not true...but faith is not rational.

Farzana's father had made sure that his children learned alternative history of Islam. She explained that

*Amar Abba* (my father), he prayed but as I said earlier he was not dogmatic. It was important for him to be educated. Educated in [the sense] of knowing where things came from. He was a gardener and he explained that everything had roots, even the Qur'an...I [did not] understand what he was saying until many years later. He would bring books home and leave them on the table. He [would not] tell us to read it. The book would sit there. If we were interested we would peak at it and then *aytha dorsai* (it would hook us)...The Qur'an, [it has] roots, the history of it are the roots...we all hear it got collected and magically it was perfect and that everyone saw the beauty. But that is not the history. There were many copies of the Qur'an...maybe with different readings and maybe the same reading...who knows. The thing is the others were destroyed...burnt...like Germany's *kristolnacht*...why...the Mulabes [do not] want you to ask [because] they are comfortable now...

Farzana, like Polly was very critical of *Mulabes*. She did not have a good opinion of them. To her the majority of them were uneducated, doling out erroneous facts

regarding many things but regarding women in particular. They always had some *hadith* (narrative and praxis of Muhammad) or some *surah* (chapter in the Qur'an) that demonstrated how despicable women were. Farzana was sure many of the village *Mulabes* had most probably had never read the whole Qur'an in its entirety. Farzana believed that involvement in Bangladeshi politics by the religious parties had brought about chaos to Bangladesh and had seriously undermined its liberal principles. Religion was important to Farzana, but it needed to be kept in its sphere. It was important for Farzana that Bangladesh had a plurality of religions. Farzana had quite a few friends in university that were Hindus and Christians.

Interestingly, given her opinions on *Mulabes*, she and her siblings had a *huzoor* (religious teacher) come to their home to teach them Arabic and the Qur'an. Farzana remembered a particular lesson that the *huzoor* was at pains to make clear to both her sister and her. The *huzoor* elucidated that a woman was like a diamond, glittering and beautiful. It was the responsibility of every woman to safeguard herself against the desires of men, since the diamond must be kept pure. Farzana acknowledged that women needed to safeguard their honor but she openly wondered why only women would suffer the mortal repercussions of this transgression. Why was the man excused for his part? Obviously Farzana's personal experience of carrying on a romance must have some saliency on this perspective.

Bengali culture dictates that the daughter becomes a part of her husband's family and thus becomes a guest in her father's house. Farzana deeply missed her mother. Since her father had passed away, she pined for her mother. However, as Farzana's brother was married, her mother lived with her new daughter in law. At times, it appeared that Farzana was deeply conflicted about her new sister in law. She was

happy that her mother was treated well and was happy, but at times she felt that her sister in law was taking her place. Farzana articulated that she knew that she would have to leave her homeland if she wanted to get a PhD. However, she had not given much thought to the severing of ties that coming to America would entitle. Farzana elucidated that after all these years; she now understood all the old Hindi movies where the bride is crying as she is leaving her home.

### Classical Exegesis

Traditional research on exegesis has concentrated on these exegetes but according to Arkoun this only further ensnares Muslims in the same dogmatic enclosures. It is crucial to open up exegetical space and explore the work of fresh and marginalized interpreters belonging to peripheral groups such as diaspora women, Arkoun postulates that such works are inestimable for graphing the boundaries between the thinkable, unthinkable and unthought in Islam (Arkoun, 1994).

In the examination of Qur'anic exegesis what rapidly becomes clear is the amount of exegetical diversity (*ikhtilaf*) that was prevalent within the classical period and that still exists (Esack, 2005). The presence of *ikhtilaf* (exegetical diversity) quite clearly refutes orthodoxy's intimation that there is and has always been one monolithic Qur'anic interpretation and Islam. In order to explore the richness in the diversity of Qur'anic exegesis I will look at the interpretations of select classical exegetes, the parameters of the interpretations and briefly explore the cultural milieu in which these commentaries were produced. When interpreting, individuals are influenced not only by their religious texts and teachings but also by their own social, cultural and religious

backgrounds. Exegetes are no exception to this rule. All the exegetes could not help but be influenced by their own sense of what is right and wrong, natural and unnatural which is strongly influenced by culture.

There are three broadly defined periods of exegetical development; the formative stage which occurred during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad and his closest companions, the age of the successors of those companions and the ensuing centuries of completions and summaries (Ayoub, 1984) . Ignaz Goldziher (1981) classified five categories of exegesis; traditional, rationalist, mystical, sectarian and modern. To this group we must add a sixth category, a feminist or womanly exegesis (McAuliffe, 1991).

Classical Qur'anic commentaries typically conform to a specific and expected structure; beginning with the first surah in the written Qur'an and proceeding in a linear sequence to the last surah. Taking each surah in turn, exegetes moved systematically from one verse to the next, although some commentaries gathered a group of sequential verses for attention (McAuliffe, 2006). These commentaries thus have each part connecting to each subsequent portion and are described as *musalsal* or linked. This linked or *musalsal* mode of commentary has been strongly critiqued by contemporary exegetes who contend that this method is "atomistic" (Wadud, 1999) and fails to treat the Qur'an as a textual unity (Hanafi, 1996). Classical and some modern tafsir manifest a systematic and internally invariable corpus of literature since they are focused on "accumulated meanings" (Hanafi, 1996).

In examining a surah, classical Qur'anic exegesis elucidated and was constrained within a restrictive number of hermeneutical axioms. When analyzing a sura, exegetes asked the following questions : where was the surah revealed, in Mecca or medina?: What were the occasions of revelations ( *as bab al-nuzul*) that is to say what



spurred its revelation: should the surah be read specially or generally (*al- amm wa-i-khas*), and does it affect a single person, a specific group or is its meaning germane to a more expansive body: If and why there are grammatical abnormalities, such as repetitive words and phrases: are there different readings or vocalization of the surah: has the surah been abrogated or does it still have legal repercussions: what is the surah's spiritual value, its "excellences" (*fada'il*) and extra exegetical evidence of enumeration such as number of surahs verses words and letters of the Qur'an (McAuliffe, 2006).

I will focus on two major classical exegetes whose work has served both as a template and an influential reservoir of information for all preceding Qur'anic exegesis. Shi'I exegesis will also be touched upon to highlight the different stresses that each group places on Qur'anic exegesis. The period from Muhammad's death to Tabari, the first exegete considered, saw the growth and consolidation of the principal fields of Islamic intellectual endeavor; hadith, jurisprudence (*fiqh*), grammar and lexicography (Robinson, 2003). After the classical era of exegesis, and with orthodoxies "shutting the gates of *ijtihad*", an incredibly vast interval passes before exegetical production is again picked up in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This gap has served to further allow orthodoxy to demarcate and squeeze the parameters of dogmatic enclosure, which has had grave repercussions on women, and new exegetes that attempt fresh Qur'anic exegesis.

#### Al-Tabari (d. 310/923)

Abu Ja'far Muhammad b. Jarir al-Tabari was born in Tabaristan, in Persia at the height of the Abbasid caliphate. His Qur'anic commentary is called *Jami'al-bayan' and ta'wil ay al-Qur'an* (the comprehensive classification of the interpretations of the

verses of the Qur'an) and it is both the principle traditional work of exegesis and a momentous milestone in tafsir, exemplifying a significant stage in the history of Qur'anic exegesis ( Gatje, 1976) Tabari's wealth allowed him access to travel and to the best teachers of his era, who grounded him in grammar, lexicography, philosophy, and origins of foreign loan words to Arabic; all skills considered essential for Qur'anic exegesis. It is important to note that al-Tabari's social position was an elite and privileged male. He travelled extensively over the Islamic empire.

Tabari's exegesis was produced at the latter end of the long period of vigorous debate and experimentation, during which the consolidation of Islamic orthodoxy was, achieved (Calder, 1993). This was a provocative era, which experienced extended debate and conflict between "the rationalist 'Mu'tazilites and the traditionalist (*ahl-al-hadith*). Additionally, Tabari's tafsir is an important reservoir for all subsequent exegetes; nearly all classical and post-classical exegetes have used his commentary as the building blocks of their own tafsir (McAuliffe, 1988).

*Jami'al-bayan' an ta'wil ay al-Qur'an* is an extremely exhaustive and critical summative archive of the first two hundred years of Muslim exegesis. However, exhaustive is not tantamount to unedited as Tabari freely picked and choose hadiths or traditions to include in his tafsir; the work is acclaimed for the sheer volume of exegetical hadiths that it includes (Ayoub, 1984). This editing is an extremely critical point, as it demonstrates that an exegete's positionality and subjectivity is replicated in their interpretation. Tabari freely presents his own views, criticism, and analyses of the various traditions that he propagates and examines in the commentary (Ayoub, 1984).

In addition to his analysis of diverse traditions, readings and grammatical matters Tabari addresses critics of any exegetical activity, reputations of past exegetes, and the debatable status of *al-tafsir bi-al-ray*; opposing scholars that depart from the

literal meaning( McAuliffe, 1991. In *Jami'al-bayan' an ta'wil ay al-Qur'an*, Tabari erects a tafsir which places hadith at its core. The prominence given to hadith must be considered in the light of the compilation of Bukhari's massive hadith collection, which occurred in this era. Thus hadith itself would have been seen as something new and cutting edge.

#### Al-Zamakshari (467/ 1075 – d. 538 / 1142)

The Mu'tazilites leaning scholar Abu al-Qasim Mahmud b. Umar al-Zamakshari was as born in the province of khwarazm, one of the last bastions of Mu'tazilites philosophy His tafsir *al-kashshaf 'an haqa'iq gha'wamid al-tanzil wa-uyun al aqawil fi wujub al-ta'wil* shows his erudite and subtle intellect with which he utilizes to examine hadith analytically( McAuliffe, 2006). As a consequence of his long residency in Mecca, Zamakshari was called '*Jar Allah*' (God's neighbor); which may explain why his Mu'tazilites inspired tafsir is still highly regarded by Muslim orthodoxy (Ayoub, 1984). The great strength in *al-kashshaf* is in its stress on linguistic analysis. Zamakshari analyzed the stylistic peculiarities of the Qur'an, rationalizing obvious textual irregularities; deviation of word order and morphology and expected unusual significations. However the weakness of Zamakshari's work lies in its lack of interest in the legitimacy in either the chain of hadith transmitters or reliability of the actual transmitted text (Ayoub, 1984). This is critical, as the errors incorporated vis-à-vis the hadith are incorporated into other interpretations.

#### The Cultural Milieu of Tabari and Zamakshari

As noted above Tabari was born in Persia. In order to grasp the cultural presuppositions that both Tabari and Zamakshari brought to his interpretation, it is important to briefly survey Persian cultural and intellectual climate vis-à-vis women. Both the Umayyads and the Abbasids were dynastic monarchies who actively worked to lay aside much of the early egalitarianism of Islam. Both dynasties profusely borrowed cultural and institutional traditions from conquered peoples and their neighbors: the Byzantines, Assyria-Sassanid's and Zoroastrians. Moreover, they were strongly influenced by the cultural and intellectual heritages of the Mediterranean region: the Greeks and Romans.

The Persians (Sassanid), whose lands the Arabs conquered, influenced the Umayyads and the Abbasids tremendously. Besides inheriting their infrastructure and administrative machinery, the Umayyads and Abbasids also inherited the elite customs and prerogatives of the area. The Persians strictly segregated their women. Additionally, upper class and respectable women were required by law to veil. Lower class females and prostitutes were not allowed to veil. Persian attitudes towards gender and females are extremely important as many of them seeped into the hadith collection of Bukhari, who came from the Persian heartlands. This is critical as both Tabari and Zamakshari's exegesis gives primacy to hadiths (Keddie&Baron, 1991).

Byzantine females were not to be seen or heard outside their home, the only exception being prostitutes. Furthermore, it was not proper for Byzantine females to sit in the company of men, unless they were her close agnate kin. Consequently females usually ate separately. Just like their Sassanid counterparts, Byzantine females were required to be veiled and to be covered from head to toe. Byzantine society excluded females from religious activities. There was a strong assumption of the uncleanness and polluting nature of the female body. After giving birth a Byzantine woman was

considered unclean for forty days. This is interesting since it mirrors a Bangladeshi custom; women are also kept inside the house for forty days after childbirth. In Muslim Bangladeshi communities, the reason for this enforcement is seen as a device to allow the mother to achieve rest and regain her strength. However, Hindu Bangladeshi communities spoke of the polluting nature of the mother. One interlocutor, who was a village health worker, said that Hindu women of the *para* (sub-section of the village) had a special segregated hut where the mother would stay for the forty days.

Assyrian perspectives on women were coupled with Zoroastrian beliefs, which resulted in Females being regarded as property to be owned by males. Zoroastrians considered women as somewhere on the continuum of personhood and “thingness”. According to Zoroastrian law women’s main function was reproduction (Stearns, 2006).

It is important to remember that both exegetes, but Tabari specially were writing during the post mihnah period. The mihnah had been greatly influenced by Greek rationalist and Platonic concepts. And even though the traditionalists had persevered over the Mu’tazilites, some of their assumptions that had been colored by Greeks were embedded permanently. This point is important to foreground as Zamakshari had Mu’tazilite tendencies. Aristotle’s views on women and gender heavily influenced the ulema in the Abbasid period. According to Aristotle, female bodies were defective and females were really just as an impotent male. Moreover, Aristotle enjoined the servitude and ill-treatment of women as a “social necessity and “natural”, since the rule of men over women was analogous to the “rule of the soul over the body” and of the intellect over passion (Stearns. 2006).

Greek society was very much a patriarchal system. Females were considered inferior to males, their principle function being reproduction. Greek women were not

viewed as legally competent. They went through life with a compulsory male guardian: their fathers and then their husbands. Intellectually, females in the Greek system were considered incapable of reasoning and were thus nearer to nature. In some instances women were perceived as a punishment inflicted on men by the gods (Keddie&Baron, 1991).

A phenomenon that had great impact on Islam was slaveholding. Ali (2005) highlights the elite practice of slavery and the use of slaves as sexual partners throughout the Ancient Mediterranean, Assyrian and Sassanid societies. Ali states that slaveholding in these societies and in the Muslim empires embodied an acceptance of females as sexual property. This worldview significantly contoured the discourse within classical Islamic interpretations and law. Al-Safi, an 8<sup>th</sup> century jurist decreed that a male could have as many concubines as he wished, since God had not limited man in this category (Ali, 2005). In contrast to the Ancient Mediterranean, Assyrian and Sassanid societies, classical Islamic interpretations emphasize the sexual availability of the wife as the principle reason for her maintenance by the husband.

Additionally, both Muslim and Christian societies of this era had similar ideas in regard to the locus of a man's honor being embedded in the purity of his natal family. This is not surprising as both these cultures were influenced by common intellectual influences. What can be perceived from this very brief overview of Tabari and Zamakshari cultural milieu is that society was extremely hierarchal: men over women, Muslim over non-muslim and free person over slave. Females in both the Umayyad and Abbasid societies were established in a clear hierarchy that placed men above women. All of the above norms and mores of their culture was incorporated to some degree in both Tabari and Zamakshari's commentaries.

## Shi'i Exegesis

The fault lines between Sunni and Shi'I Qur'anic exegesis revolve around the nature of the queries directed at the Qur'an. The differences arise as the integrity and canonical validity of the Uthmanic codex is contested by some shi'i. According to Shi'I doctrine fabrications (*tahrif*) of the Qur'anic text was perpetuated as a consequence of political misrepresentations by the Prophet's companions, especially the first three Caliphs: Abu Bakr, Umar and Uthman (Nasr, 2006). The falsification (*tahrif*) are deletions and additions of phrases addressing the legitimacy of Ali, the Prophets family and the Shi'I themselves as the rightful heirs of the Prophetic tradition. Shi'I doctrine elucidates that the complete Qur'an no longer exists in its original form but will be unveiled by the Mahdi near the end time (Bar-Asher, 1999). Interestingly the Shi'I exegetes Abu Jafar al-Tusi and Abu Ali l-fadl b. Hasan al-Tabarsi wrote that although the Uthmanic text is incomplete, it does not include any falsehoods (Gatje, 1976; Calder, 1993). Their opinions may have been formulated to reflect the fact of a shi'i minority living with the majority Sunni fold.

Shi'I exegesis is thus formulated to buttress the doctrines of the imamate and the sole authority of Ali and the Imams to explain the Qur'an. Two exegetical concepts that underpin these doctrines view the Qur'an as a source of secret esoteric knowledge with its functionality being a general teacher. Shia believes the Qur'an consists of esoteric (*batin*) meanings, which are communicated by symbols, and codes that only the imams can decipher. Therefore only through the mediation of Shi'I imams, can both the exoteric (*zahir*) and esoteric (*batin*) meaning of the Qur'an be revealed (Nasr, 2006). This doctrine is clarified by the Shi'I metaphor of the imams as the "the speaking book of God" (*Kitab Allah al-natiq*) (Bar-Asher, 1999). Additionally, Shi'I understands the Qur'an

to delineate principles while customs and traditions illustrate its particulars. Thus the Qur'an restricts itself to broad principles, expounding religious laws and general rulings but not venturing into specificity, which is the prerogative reserved for the exegete.

As a consequence Shi'I exegetes are not so concerned with explaining the Qur'an but rather focus on uncovering specific references to separation from their enemies and to the concept of the imamate and imams: their interpretive rights, their mystical and metaphysical characteristics and loyalty to the Imamate (Bar-Asher, 1999). Sunni exegesis uses the practices (*Sunna*) of the Prophet as a Qur'anic interpretative tool, whilst the family of the Prophet performs the analogous role in Shi'I praxis.

The Shi'I methodological repertoire includes allegory, secret codes, typology, application of *qiriat* (variant readings) and textural alterations (addition of words presumed to have been omitted from the Uthmanic codex). Specific Qur'anic verses said to have negative implications or allude to sinners and evil are analyzed through typological and allegorical prisms to refer to historical leaders of Sunni Islam and common enemies of Shi'i. Principal among these figures are the first three caliphs, two of Muhammad's wives (Aisha and Hafsa, the daughters of the first two caliphs), and the Umayyad and the Abbasid dynasties.

### Indo-Muslim Scholar of the Qur'an

In any discussion concerning Qur'anic exegesis it is the Arab discourse that is constantly foregrounded. As I stated in the introduction, the Arab world comprises twenty percent of the worldwide Muslim population; however intellectual and cultural



discourse concerning Islam pushes the other eighty percent that live out their lives exterior to the Middle East, to the periphery.

The four Indo-Muslim exegetes surveyed below have significantly influenced South Asian outlooks on Islam and the Qur'an and to a large extent their commentaries are reflective of the Indian culture within which they were embedded. Furthermore, each exegetes was firmly located in liminal periods in the social, cultural and economic history of India: Shah Wali Allah saw the disintegration of Muslim rule in India: Sayyid Ahmad Khan lived in the transitional period of British colonial consolidation: Muhammad Iqbal experienced the twilight of colonial rule and the birth of the Freedom movement in India and lastly Mawlana Mawdudi, lived in partitioned India and the created Islamic state of Pakistan. It is provocative that all except Sha Wali Allah lacked formal Qur'anic Madrasa training, and thus their commentaries are reflective of lay South Asian Muslim men interpreting the Qur'an. Liminality allowed these thinkers to simultaneously open up fresh lines of interpretation and challenge the orthodox ulema's interpretation of the Qur'an.

### Cultural Milieu of the Indian Subcontinent

The Indian subcontinent has been influenced by many groups: Hindu, Buddhists, Jain, Persianized Muslims conquerors and the British Raj. Converts to Islam retained Hindu-Buddhist and animist traditions, including those pertaining to the status of women. The Muslim empires of India absorbed many indigenous Brahmanic institutions and doctrines. Thus, caste and the idea of women's inferiority vis-à-vis men were accepted as part of the natural order by Indian society under the Mughal Empire. Leading Hindu reformers such as Ramakrishna Parmhansa (1836-86) favored patriarchy

and subjugation of women. He compared females to human excreta and objects not worthy of love. In these commentaries he eerily echoes the Christian, St. Augustine. Vishnubawa Brachari (1825-71) stated that women were a distraction for men and were females to be independent of males, disaster would befall all society.

Islam, according to historians spread to the subcontinent and Bengal around 1200. Muslims ruled from approximately 122 to June 24<sup>th</sup>, 1757. Most historians agree that Islam was most likely spread to Bengal by Sufi's. By the time it reached India, it had been syncretised with metaphysical concepts devolved among the Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain religions. Indian Sufis believed the human soul was part of the Divine soul and a man's soul could be united with the Divine soul, if he developed his soul to the utmost. Sufi Islam often times has a spiritual relationship with the *pir* (guide). Additionally in the Subcontinent, there are regular visits to and veneration of Sufi shrines. In rural areas there are Sufi religious communities of Bauls, wandering from villages, signing devotional Sufi songs.

The most popular are the shrine of Shah Jalal in Sylhet and Sha Makhdoom in Rajshai. How Islam is embedded is embedded in Bangladeshi society. Awami league championed Bengali nationalism and language as the new theme of the new state and rejected religion as basis of state formation and nationhood.

#### Shah Wali Allah (1703- 1762)

Shah Wali Allah was a major influence on all subsequent South Asian Muslim writers. He lived in Delhi during the declining era of the Mughal Empire, a period of great change for both India and Muslims, which saw newly emerging quasi independent states. Shah Wali Allah's was born into an elite Delhi Naqshbandis Sufi

family; he could trace his lineage back to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab. He personally took the formal Sufi allegiance to a personal spiritual master, his father, at the age of 15, as his spiritual guide. A contemporary of Ibn Wahabb, Shah Wali Allah was deeply influenced by the 12<sup>th</sup> century exegete Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328). After graduating from the Madrasa at 15 he went to Arabia in 1731 for further instruction; he most probably met Ibn Wahabb whilst there (Baljon, 1986).

In his writings Shah Wali Allah warned Indian Muslims to always consider them-selves foreigners (*gharib*) and not allow themselves to be influenced by Hindu culture and social patterns. He stressed *tawhid* (the unicity of God) and opposed any practice that associated anything with God. As a practicing Sufi, Wali Allah was accustomed to the notions of saints and intermediaries; however, whilst he agreed with the idea of Sufi saints and the reverence given to Prophets, he declared that they could not be legitimate objects of worship (Hermensen, 1995).

In 1756 Wali Allah completed a Persian translation of the Qur'an (*Fath al-Rahman*). Persian was the *lingua franca* of the Muslim literati in the sub-continent. His translation of the Qur'an popularized a more intimate reading and facilitated its understanding and interpretation. It also opened up the domain of Qur'anic scholarship to educated lay people. Wali Allah wrote *al-Fawz al-Kabr fi usual al-Tafsir*, which discussed the problems of interpretation and mapped the principles that needed to be cultivated to accurately interpret the Qur'an (Baljon, 1986). He advocated a direct and intimate approach to both the Qur'an and the Sunna; an approach that Wali Allah believed had the power avert debate from the theological and doctrinal differences inherent in the different schools of thought to the fundamentals of religion.

Shah Wali Allah reveals his Sufi background, his strong emphasis on the cardinal link between man, the creation and the Creator and the doctrine of 'universal soul' (*al-nafs alkulliyah*). Shah Wali Allah the diversity of universal phenomena guides human intelligence to the understanding that God has formed a universal soul *ex-nihilo*. It is from this 'universal soul' that things come forth. This relationship between the Creator and the 'universal soul' is far beyond the grasp of the human mind, which may be why Wali Allah does not try to form via pure reason the existence of God (Hermensen, 1995). This concept of the universal soul echoes to a great deal the Hindu philosophy of the Upanishads; which perhaps demonstrates that although Wali Allah may have considered himself forgiven to India, he was wholly a product of indo-Muslim culture!

Shah Wali considered the Sunna as essentially a commentary on the Qur'an itself, rather than an independent entity. There was an organic relationship between the Qur'an and the Sunna. Shah Wali Allah maintained that the sharia was located firmly within the Qur'an and Sunna, considering them the only sources of sharia. The way to access them was the legitimate and obligatory tool of *ijtihad* (intellectual reasoning). However *ijtihad* (intellectual reasoning must be utilized along with consensus achieved by past scholars. Wali Allah Sharia for Wali Allah developed from Arab traditions and customs, thus sharia was dynamic and must also transform according to the shifting circumstances and needs of diverse locations and peoples (al-Ghazzali, 2001).

However, Wali Allah's views can become obfuscated at times since he differentiates between the sharia of earlier prophets whose applicability appear to be limited territorially and temporally and the sharia of Prophet Muhammad which he

understands as being universally applicable and enduring for ever! In usage of ijma or consensus as a source of Muslim law, unlike other jurists, Wali Allah restricted its usage (al-Ghazzali, 2001). He accepted the compulsory nature of ijma of the “rightly guided caliphs”, especially Abu Bakr, 'Umar and 'Uthman, on any interpretation of the Qur'an or the Sunna, on the basis of their special relationship with the Prophet and their temporal proximity to him.

The two concepts of Wali Allah's that have significant consequences in respects to Indo Muslim scholarship are the principle of *takhayyar* and the concept of *Khilafa*. *Takhayyar* (eclectic legal choice) allows indo Muslims to follow the rulings of any of the 4 principle Muslim schools of law. In essence Wali Allah “developed an inter-justice eclecticism recommending that on any doctrine or ritual, a Muslim can follow the rulings of all 4 principle juristic schools”. His concept of the *Khilafa* is a radical departure from the past traditions of South Asian scholars. There are two mode of succession stemming from the Prophet Muhammad: political and religious, rather than separating the two functions Wali Allah advocated a religious-political schema of a universal caliphate. Muhammad Iqbal and Mawdudi both would pick up strains of this theory to make fundamental contributions to indo-Muslim concepts of Islam (Baljon, 1986).

#### Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817- 1898)

Sayyid Ahmad Khan, a magistrate and diplomat by profession is the founder of Islamic modernism in South Asia. In addition to his exegesis of the Qur'an, Ahmad Khan also produced a commentary of the Bible. The position of Indian Muslims in a

colonial realm, and his understanding of cultural systems as fluid processes rather than fixed entities deeply informed Ahmad Khan's interpretation of the Qur'an (McDonough, 1984). Like Muhammad Abduh of Egypt, Ahmad Khan embraced a rationalistic exegesis, where Islam was fully lucid in light of Western science. Ahmad Khan's commentary declared that religion, which is established by God, must be within the capacity of modern intelligence, since the only path to understand the obligatory disposition of religion is through the intellect (Troll, 1978). Throughout his interpretation Ahmad Khan establishes that there is no inherent contradiction between modern natural sciences and the Qur'an. Thus, nature is the "work of God" and the Qur'an is the "word of God", therefore His word, the revelation, cannot contradict his work; nature (al-Ghazzali, 2001). Ahmad Khan concludes that it's inconceivable that the Qur'an substantiate anything contradicting scientific reason. If the Qur'an and nature appeared to be in conflict, it arose out of Muslim failure to fully understand Gods revelation.

Ahmad Khan drew a distinction between the essence of the Qur'an and what belonged to the temporal time when it was revealed. He is extremely critical of utilizing hadiths as the basis of interpreting the Qur'an and establishing religious law since he considered much of the hadiths as unreliable. Ahmad Khan insisted that the Qur'an be explained in light of circumstances of 7<sup>th</sup> century Arabia and that the reliability of hadiths must be judged with reason and in their relationship to Qur'anic injunctions rather than in the soundness of their transmitters ( Troll, 1978); McDonough, 1984). Basically, Ahmad Khan's declares that regardless of hadiths that inform Muslims that the Prophet said this or did that, if the hadith contradicts the Qur'an, Muslims must not apply it to their life.

The constant element in Islam according to Ahmad Khan was the individual human's personal relation with God (*din*); however *sharia*, which Ahmad Khan understood as the social and political aspects of the religion, necessarily permuted as the configurations of life in the world changed. Therefore Muslims do not need to seek Qur'anic guidance vis-à-vis phenomena such as housing, clothing or other common situations of life, as these varied with the times and were not pivotal to a person's religion (McDonough, 1984). Fakhr al-Din al-Razi and al-Ghazzali were two classical exegetes who insisted that the capacity to make deductions was a prerequisite that superseded formal Islamic training (McDonough, 1984). Therefore Ahmad Khan proclaimed that Muslims were free to interpret for themselves what God asked of them, as the Qur'an was addressed to each person, it should therefore be internalized by that individual.

According to Ahmad Khan God selected to utilize certain metaphorical expressions in the Qur'an since they served as a marker of common metaphor in the Arabic language of the prophet's day, rendering them understandable to Muhammad's contemporaries (McDonough, 1984). Exegetes thus must attempt to comprehend the Qur'anic text as the ancient Arabs to whom it was addressed understood it. Since Ahmad Khan used an essentially rationalistic approach to Qur'anic interpretation his exegesis purges miraculous events and supernatural phenomena, such as angels and jinn from his understanding of the Qur'anic text; Khan views jinn as primitive savages existing in the jungle, whilst, the *miraj*, the Prophet's night journey is explained as a dream.

Ahmad Khan has been critiqued as too conservative in regards to the question of women. However, his commentary must be read in the light of intense colonial debate regarding *Sati* (widow burning), and widow remarriage. He argued that

Islam had given more rights to women than they had previously held, however he was hesitant in declaring that Muslims must radically change their marriage and family life patterns. Women according to Ahmad Khan had the same moral and spiritual rights as men in their relation to God. He was a strongly advocate for women's education albeit he favored education regarding the more traditional responsibilities of children and the home; much of this view must be put into perspective vis-à-vis the cultural milieu of colonial India( Troll, 1978) ;McDonough, 1984).

### Muhammad Iqbal (1877- 1938)

Muhammad Iqbal was a poet, a philosopher, a Sufi mystic, and a political and religious thinker who is considered the ideological father of Pakistan. An intellectual product of India, Cambridge and Munich, Iqbal was able to synthesize the many strands of Muslim and western philosophical thought to construct a new paradigm in Islamic Muslim thought (Tariq, 1973). Iqbal did not write a Qur'anic exegesis per se but the intellectual and philosophical framework that he constructed has profoundly shaped the way that the Quran is understood in South Asia (Hassan, 1987).

Iqbal, although profoundly influenced by Nietzsche, Bergson and Goethe, was a strong critic of the Western concept of the separation of religion from the State and in the West's obsession with material pursuits; human knowledge and religious experience were inimical to each other. For Iqbal Islam did not bifurcate the unity of man into conflicting duality of spirit and matter since God and everything that existed in his universe is being organic to each other.



In embracing the Sufi mystic Rumi, who is featured prominently in many of Iqbal's poems, Iqbal views the Qur'an as inherently dynamic in character (Hassan, 1987). The Qur'anic message for Mankind is, according to Iqbal the concept that life is a process of continuous creation which entails that each new generation must be "guided but be unhampered by its predecessor" to resolve their own issues utilizing their own intellect. Moreover the aim of life is self-realization and self-knowledge, where the self must transverse stages before arriving at perfection, enabling the knower of the self to become a Vicegerent of God. (Mir, 2006) This process of perfection mirrors the Hindu, Buddhist, Jain philosophy of Samsara, wheel of life, which again demonstrates shared cultural underpinnings of exegesis. Thus for Iqbal the essential point is the "guided but unhampered" nature of exegesis (Hassan, 1987). Moreover Iqbal clarifies that the cardinal axiom of dynamism in Islam is *ijtihad* (Intellectual reasoning). We must be clear that Iqbal is not advocating jettisoning past exegetes or their exegesis but rather the emphasis is on the fresh and new approaches that each contemporary community produces to address the issues important to them. Thus as Iqbal declares

"No people can reject their past entirely; for it is their past  
that has made their personal identity"

Iqbal revives past glories of Islamic civilization and delivers a message of Islam as part pure spirituality and part a reservoir of socio-political liberty and greatness (Hassan, 1987). Although Iqbal acknowledges the idea of a universal ummah, the world wide Muslim community of believers, he rejects orthodoxy's understanding and formulation of the Prophets community in Medina, as the ideal Muslim state and declares that it was unrealized (Mir, 2006). This Muslim unthinkable is what gives Iqbal his gravitas in Indo-Muslim scholarship. Iqbal elucidates that the polity of Medina and

the Rashidun does not exemplify the ideal state; the ideal has never been realized historically and Iqbal acknowledges that it may well be unrealizable in the future. Iqbal articulated that Islam was a legitimate source of government and society, here both he and Mawdudi agree, which is ironic in many respects as Mawdudi was initially vehemently opposed to the two nation solution. (Mir, 2006) However Mawdudi comes closer to Iqbal's philosophy of an ideal Islamic state that rejects secularism and nationalism; for Mawdudi the rejection is necessary to go back to medina, whilst for Iqbal the rejection is the search for a medina in the future.

Another unthought that Iqbal brings to the fore is the legal principle of *ijma* or consensus. In contrast to orthodoxy's formulations, Iqbal views *ijma* as a consensus that was realized through the debate and consultations of a legislative assembly whose members both collectively and independently used *ijtihad*.

Even though Iqbal saw nationalism as a subtle form of idolatry, he could not perceive a solution for dilemma of a Muslim minority in Hindu dominated postcolonial India except an independent Muslim state; he outlined a vision for Muslim majority provinces in North West India (Hassan, 1987). A pragmatist Iqbal recognized the strength of an individual's emotional attachment to his place of birth. Iqbal never lived to see Pakistan, however in its creation Pakistan and in modern Pakistan Islam and nationalism have become synonymous

#### Mawlana Mawdudi (1903-1979)

Abul Ala Mawdudi Qur'anic commentary *Taf-him al-Qur'an* is widely read throughout South Asia. Mawdudi and his writings were products of the liminal phase of the end of colonial India and the emerging nation of Pakistan. He lived a very

turbulent life; he was imprisoned four times and sentenced to death once (Nasr, 1996). A prolific writer, and a journalist by trade, Mawdudi was predominantly self educated in Islam, although later on in life he acquired formal training as an Islamic scholar (*alim*). Mawdudi is the founder of the Islamist movement in South Asia and a leading representative of the increasing influence on Islamic theology from writer beyond the Arab nations (Donough, 1994). Deeply influenced by the Islamic Brotherhoods Hasan al-Bana, Mawdudi in turn profoundly influenced Sayyid Qutb. Freely admitting that his own understanding of Islam had been originally lacking, Mawdudi emphasized the importance of personally engaging with the Qur'anic meaning; it is an individual's duty to study the Qur'an personally, in order to thoroughly understand their religion (Nasr, 1996).

The *Taf-him al-Qur'an* (Towards an understanding of the Qur'an) took Mawdudi 30 years to write. Written in Urdu it has been extensively translated into Arabic and Bengali. The *Tafhim* integrates an explanation with the meaning of the original text of each surah, with a political and ideological interpretation of its significance for the contemporary period. Mawdudi's commentary must be viewed in the context of the minority status of Muslims in India under Colonial rule and the subsequent creation of Pakistan (Nasr, 1996). His prime concern focused on the issue of the increasingly caustic encounter of Islam with the West and the resultant impact on Islam and Islamic society. Mawdudi shunned the influence of western philosophy, economics and political theory and operated only within the limits of Muslim theology (McDonough, 1994).

Mawdudi understood that God, not man was the ultimate sovereign on earth. Therefore, the state was the executor of God. Muslims must take control of the modern state, where political power must be exercised in order to put revelation into action on

earth. Mawdudi declared that all the guidance man needed existed in the sharia (the Holy law), which encompassed all human activity. Thus the state should be only governed by sharia law, and any state or society not under sharia law was not Islamic. Proceeding from this theme Mawdudi takes great pains to articulate that non-Muslim rule is evil. Interestingly, Mawdudi rejected the exclusion of non-Muslims from an Islamic state, but embraced the more radical notion of the Islamic state subsuming all other religions; non-Muslims to be designated dhimmis, and should give up specific political rights in exchange for Muslim protection. Furthermore, Mawdudi states that simulating non-Muslim cultural practices is absolutely forbidden in Islam, stridently rejecting both the influence of Hinduism on Islam and interfaith practices (Nasr, 1996). One way to see Mawdudi and his interpretative tradition is in terms of a “born again evangelical Muslim”, who considers Islam as a universal all encompassing revolutionary movement aimed at the overthrow of all other social orders. Mawdudi established the Jama’at-i-Islammi in 1941, which is a political and social mechanism for the establishment of an Islamic state (Nasr, 1996).

Devoting a whole chapter of his commentary to women, virtually everything connected to females is by Mawdudi to be seductive and thus must be restricted; their voice, perfume, dress and their very presence. Mawdudi advocates that females must go to extreme forms of concealment so as not to cause desire in men. According to Mawdudi A woman’s position is firmly ensconced in their home and marriage, is the only proper outlet for human sexuality. Interestingly, Mawdudi supported the presidential candidacy of Fatimah Jinnah in 1965, despite his supposition that women cannot hold public office, which demonstrates that even Mawdudi could be a pragmatist when necessary (McDonough, 1994).

## Modern Arab Qur'an Scholars

Below I discuss the modern Arab Qur'anic scholars, however, of the most well known I have only included Abduh. The remaining scholars examined are all to some extent not considered totally legitimate. The reasons stem from the vanguard nature of some of their methodology and readings.

### Muhammad Abduh (1849- 1905)

Muhammad Abduh was a prominent Egyptian religious scholar, reformer and a jurist. His home based traditional religious education was continued to al-Azhar, where Abduh became influenced by Sufism. However, as a consequence of the student / teacher relationship with Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, the founder of the modern pan-Islamic movement, Abduh viewed Sufism as too individualistic and private for the modern era (Kurzman, 2002). Abduh's nationalistic inclinations tendencies resulted in his expulsion from al-Azhar in 1882. In Paris, Abduh co-published the influential anti imperial nationalistic journal *al-Wuthqa* (strong grasp) with al-Afghani before subsequently working in Beirut. Abduh returned to Egypt in 1889, where he gave a series of lectures and dictated a partial tafsir which was compiled, amended, edited and published by his student Muhammad Rashid Rida (d. 1935). Numerous twentieth century tafsir's have been heavily influenced by Abduh's commentary, among them Sayyid Qutb's (Adams, 1968).

Abduh saw Islam as the religion of reason and progress and was thus totally compatible with modernity. The Qur'anic revelation aspires to give God's guidance (*hidaya*) to humankind, thus Abduh states that God's wish for humans actualization can

only occur if the Qur'an is interpreted in a clear, simple and rational form so. Abduh viewed the province of exegetes and tafsir as illuminators of the intended meaning, rationales, intrinsic belief system, legislation, and rulings of the Qur'an (*fahm al-murad min al-qawl*); a competent exegete and tafsir would entice people to the Qur'an and empower them to be guided by it (Kurzman, 2002). On the fundamental point, Abduh agrees with Ahmad Khan, full comprehension of Gods guidance, the Qur'anic text can only be understood , vis-à-vis the meaning its words had for its first audiences. This rationale corresponds to Abduh's perspective that single words and phrases cannot be the prime focus for exegetes but must rather focus on the didactic goal of the passage (Kurzman, 2002). Consequently the accurate interpretation of an expression can only understand by contemplating its context.

Highly critical of traditional tafsir's methodology, Abduh rejected previous stresses on philological and rhetorical qualities of the Qur'an; practices he deemed "dry and distances one from God and his book". He also critiqued the insular juristic focus of prior tafsirs which viewed the Qur'an primarily as a law book; law was the least discussed matter in the Qur'an according to both Abduh and Ahmad Khan (Adams, 1968). Furthermore, Abduh critiqued tendencies of past exegetes to forge Qur'anic statements concrete which the text itself had left indefinite; supplementing the gaps in Qur'anic narrative and correlating individuals whose names are not plainly identified with *isra'iliyyat* materials.

In *Tafsir al-manar*, Abduh addresses contemporary problems and issues that were being faced by a colonial Egyptian society at the cusp of the twentieth century. He sections the Qur'anic text into clusters of verses composed of consequent units and considers the text of the Qur'an as a single entity. Even though Abduh does not always faithfully abide by his principles, *Tafsir al-manar* demonstrates a propensity to

concentrate on the rationality of Islam and has an affirmative outlook towards science (Kurzman, 2002). The commentary also demonstrates the complexity of locating a path between *taqlid* (blind obedience to tradition) and jettisoning Islam for a western modernity; this conflict manifests itself time and again throughout Abduh's writings. Also like Ahmad Khan, Abduh attempts to erase components of popular Muslim belief and practices which he considered to be superstitious (Adams, 1968).

#### Amin al-Khuli (1895-1966)

Amin al-Khuli was primarily responsible for incorporating literary studies within Qur'anic exegesis and developing a thematic approach to the understanding and interpretation of the Qur'an. Although al-Khuli, a professor of Arabic language and literature at the University of Cairo never wrote a Qur'anic commentary himself, he profoundly influenced not only his students but a whole new generation of exegetes (Jansen, 1980). Al-Khuli raised questions associated with the history and current exegetical methodological requirements. Khuli advocates that, the Qur'an is "the greatest book of the Arabic language and its most important literary work" and thus the methods for studying the Qur'an as a work of literature essentially are not that different from any other works of literature (Taji-farouki, 2004).

In order to study the Qur'an as literature two fundamental topics need to explore: the historical background and the circumstances of its genesis- that is the Qur'an's entry into the world by revelation. Al-Khuli assumes that God in addressing the Qur'an's first audience had to use their language, and adapt his speech to their modes of comprehension, in order for the message to be understood by Muhammad's Arab contemporaries. al-Khuli states that in order for the divine intention of the text can

be established, “regardless of any religious considerations” its precise meaning must be known, as the 7<sup>th</sup> century Arabs, to whom the message was first addressed, understood it. In order to fully grasp the Qur’an, we must comprehend the Arabs and their world (Taji-farouki, 2004). It is only by engaging in a in-depth and holistic way can exegetes perceive the 7<sup>th</sup> century Arab social milieu, religious and cultural traditions, their language and previous literary achievements, the timetable and occasions of the revelations, and the enunciation of the Qur’anic text by Muhammad. Thus only when comprehension of the Arabs cultural system emerges will modern readers establish the exact meaning of the Qur’anic text, word by word, as its first listeners understood it (Kurzman, 1998).

Al-Khuli explains that it is feasible to consider the Qur’an’s artistic qualities using the same categories and parameters applied in literary theory. Qur’anic style can be analyzed by looking at the convention that regulating choice of words, the idiosyncrasies of the construction of sentences, and the forms of speech used in the text. As literature is characterized by certain relationships between content or theme on the one hand and the formal means of expression on the other, Khuli stresses great importance to the thematic and emphasizes that correct explanations should force commentators to contemplate all verses and passages which speak to the same subject, instead of confining their attention to one single verse or passage (Jansen, 1980). Furthermore Khuli’s approach is founded on a specific comprehension of the nature of a literary text: literature like art is primarily a way of appealing to the audiences emotions as a way s of cultivating them and their decisions. The Qur’anic interpreter should according to Khuli endeavor to explain the psychological affects that the Qur’ans artistic qualities had on its first audience.



A'isha Abd al-Rahman (1913-1998)

Published under the pseudonym of Bint al-Shati, al-Khuli's wife and student A'isha Abd al-Rahman authored the highly erudite commentary *al-Tafsir al-bayani lil-Qur'an al-karim*. The fact that commentary was published from the Cairo University's department of Arabic language and literature rather than al-Azhar can be viewed as a strategic strategy by a brilliant female scholar cautiously penetrating the male jurisdiction of Qur'anic exegesis. Additionally al-Rahman is not viewed as a controversial figure since her very strategic choice of short exegetical verses which are difficult theological suras but with no social implications (Kurzman, 1998).

Abd al-Rahman very strategically chose to limit her commentary to only the short suras of the Qur'an. This allowed her two advantages, avoid controversy and to concentrate on the literary elements of exegesis. The chosen short suras are difficult theologically but have no social implications which allow al-Rahman to bypass dogmatically acute subjects and themes, and they organically form a thematic unit. I have not included al-Rahman in the section devoted to womanly exegesis as the contents of *al-Tafsir al-bayani lil-Qur'an al-karima* are not feminist and are not meant to be.

Al-Rahman's interpretation integrates, demonstrates and highlights al-Khuli's conceptual methodology of applying literary theory to Qur'anic exegesis. Utilizing the brushstrokes of literary criticism al-Rahman diligently composes her exegesis, configuring *al-Tafsir al-bayani lil-Qur'an al-karim* with punctilious verse by verse commentary, elucidating all the difficult words and phrases and comparing other verses that have congruent or synonymous expressions. To clearly reveal the linkages that traits have to the corresponding themes, al-Rahman emphasizes prominent stylistic

characteristics of each sura: comparative compactness of sentences, clustering of explicit rhetorical elements, classified incidents of specific morphological or syntactical patterns, the emotional efficacy of the stylistic characteristics and the resultant impact on listeners of Qur'anic rhymes based on the choice of words and of the compository structure of the suras( Jansen, 1980). Arrays of analogous verses are cited by al-Rahman from other suras which share duplicate topography or show similar stylistic characteristics in order to predicate the literary correlations. Additionally al-Rahman draws upon Arabic literary trends, referencing to ancient Arabic poetry and classical Arabic dictionaries to buttress the integration of Amin al-Khuli's methodology into Qur'anic exegesis (Kurzman, 2002).

However *al-Tafsir al-bayani lil-Qur'an al-karim* does not jettison classical exegetical devices, al-Rahman discusses and is fully conversant with the opinions of classical Qur'anic commentators; developing on the conventional occasions of revelation narrative by arranging each respective sura in a chronological timeline and locating each sura in history. Al-Rahman's analysis of the occasions of revelation is more holistic than that her predecessors, whereby she contrasts, compares, clarifies, and underscores the importance of each specific sura's content during the period of revelation and contrasts it with other phases of Muhammad's mission( Jansen, 1980).

#### Muhammad Ahmad Khalaf Allah (1916-1997)

Muhammad Ahmad Khalaf Allah, another student of al-Khuli submitted his dissertation *al-Fann al-qasai fi al-Qur'an* (The art of storytelling in the Qur'an) to Cairo University. The faculty rejected it declaring it to be religiously questionable; it challenged the historical accuracy of the Qur'anic narrative pertaining to past Prophets

and as the faculty perceived it, the eternal nature of the Qur'anic revelation. Even though Khalaf Allah pronounced that the Qur'anic narrative was not a historical document per se, he strongly believed the Qur'an to be the revealed word of God, and considered God to be the only author of the Qur'an. Unfortunately In addition to not attaining his PhD. Khalaf Allah was branded a criminal (Kurzman, 1998).

*al-Fann al-qasai fi al-Qur'an* focused on the narratives and the artistic styles that made the Qur'an so unique and effective. The dissertation hypothesizes that Qur'anic narrations of past Prophets are literary components therefore they be read separately from its legislative narratives; it is critical to read and understand the Qur'an's stories as a "religious" rather than a "historical" text, since prophetic narratives "preach a lesson " rather than give accurate historical information( Jansen, 1980).

Narratives asserts Khalaf Allah need not correlate absolutely to historical facts to be psychologically effective; the divine narratives in the Quran do not correspond to historical truths, but function as psychological truths to sway the audience's sentiments. Consequently to be effective the Qur'an's tales had adapt to the primary listeners emotive and mental status ,be tightly constructed and make use of the audiences normative language, rules of rhetorical discourse and follow prior beliefs and narrative conventions. However, it is important to note that Khalaf Allah very clearly declares that that the original recipients clearly believed the Qur'an's narrative to be "real truths" (Ried, 2001).

*al-Fann al-qasai fi al-Qur'an* outlines how the divine design, purpose and style of these specific Qur'anic stories operated as formulas of guidance and direction to Muhammad, his fledgling community and humankind in general. The stories functioned primarily on two planes; to give solace, support and encouragement to Muhammad and his followers and to really frighten Islam's opponents. In order to test

his thesis, Khalaf Allah analyses the narratives to literary critical analysis; examining the absence of chronological and topographical detail, lack of individualization and personal character traits in the prophets, underlines the Qur'anic methodology of disregarding chronological sequence whilst clustering prophetic stories of a parallel moral messages, and the convention of repetition both of identical utterance and narrations.

According to Khalaf, God thus molded these narratives to mirror the Prophets personal experience and his consciousness as well as that of the original audience. In another words, God divinely fashioned the Qur'anic narratives to align with Muhammad's situation and that of its audience. Khalaf Allah's analysis of the Qur'anic historical data situated the revelation and revelatory materials strictly in the historical, temporal, socio-cultural and environmental fabric of 7<sup>th</sup> century Arabia; Muhammad's early prophetic career and community( Kurzman, 1998).

However Khalaf Allah's dissertation was perceived as questioning not only the factuality of the Qur'an's prophetic history but also the eternal nature of the Qur'anic revelation. In a vestige of the traditionalists response to the Mu'tazilites, Islamic orthodoxy reaffirmed the uncreated nature of the Qur'an, the dogma that the Qur'an is a historical source, even if it is not principally a history book and declared Khalaf Allah a heretic!

#### Mahmud Muhammad Taha (1909/1911 -1985)

The Sudanese scholar Mahmud Muhammad Taha Qur'anic exegesis, his second message of Islam theory is audacious, radical, and is a major paradigmatic shift vis-à-vis the Qur'an. The Sufi orders, played a pivotal role in the dissemination and

configuration of Sudanese Islam; while Sufism opened up “ecstatic space” it stressed soberness and a balanced synthesis of the esoteric and exoteric. Taha’s exegesis must be embedded within the within the context of his personal experience and the inclusive consensus and ideals of the Sufi beliefs. Despite immense cultural diversity, post-colonial Sudan has been defined by the hegemonic voice of Arab Islam (Mahmoud, 2006). Taha belonged to the *afandiyya*, a elite social class, who interpreted Islam vis-à-vis their colonial encounter and embraced the reformist project of Muhammad Abduh.

Taha established the *al-Hizb'l-Jumhuri* (the Republican Party) to combat colonialism and Sudanese sectarianism. He assumed that Muslim societies could, would, and should be altered through the dynamic synthesis of a revitalized tradition and modernity; thus Islam and modernity are congruent with each other. Taha’s declaration that the sharia no longer met the needs of modern Muslims prompted Sudanese political Islam to make concerted and repeated efforts to declare Taha an apostate. In 1985 Taha, along with five others was arrested and condemned to death. Mahmud Muhammad Taha was executed by hanging on 18<sup>th</sup> January 1985(Mahmoud, 2006).

Taha’s exegesis concentrates on the spiritual universe of the individual; he addresses the complexity of the relationship between individuals and their communities. He spurned the orthodox consensus of past and present Muslims who promote, and honor the established Islamic paradigm that privileges the prophetic movement, seeing it as the zenith of human salvation history. Instead, Taha gave supremacy to a future movement, when the Islamic message will be fully actualized, and equity, justice and peace will prevail. Therefore, Taha sees the golden age of Islam not in the past, but rather in the future (Taha, 1987).

Taha declares that there are two messages of Islam: a Meccan, second message and a Medina, first message. He is a fundamentalist of a very different persuasion; Taha does not want return to the 7<sup>th</sup> century Medina state, rather he calls for a return to the earlier Meccan era. According to Taha, the *hijra* was a schism between the two messages of Islam. Boldly rejecting abrogation, Taha's argument is the antithesis of established orthodox doctrine, that earlier Qur'anic revelations superseded the latter ones. For Taha, the Meccan suras personify the Universal message of Islam whilst the later Medina suras are the cultural and historical specific applications of the primordial message. Ergo, according to Taha, later generations are not tied by the explicit social rules mandated in the Medina revelations (Taha, 1987).

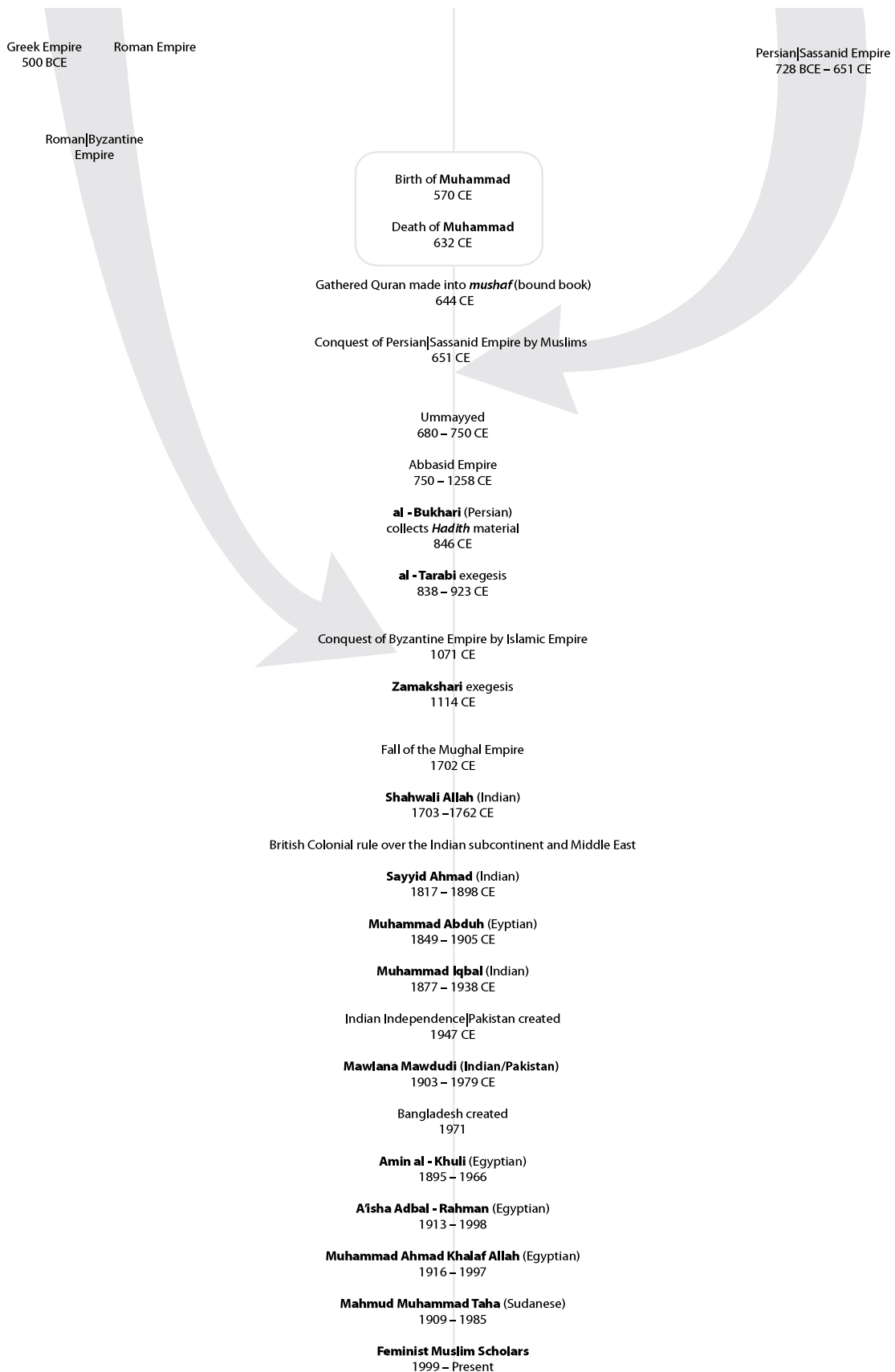
The first message of Islam (The Medina suras) functioned as the ancillary, giving the first community the parameters for their religious freedom, and established Jihad, accepted limited discrimination against females, condoned slavery and class differentiations. However it is the second message (Meccan suras), which encompass economic, political, gender and social equality, that is the prime message of the Qur'an. The Meccan suras embody the universal guidance and message that God wanted to convey but history militated against it.

The community in Medina was a unique religious and political structure whose organization and particular concerns yielded a state that was manifested with a missionary conviction of determination and expressionist drive. However, According to Taha, this community misconceived itself and was further misperceived as the consummate Muslim society by later generations, due to a misnomer. He delineates that "Islam" is a comprehensive expression connoting two meanings and so "Muslim" identifies two communities; *mu'miniyyun* (believers) and *Muslim* (those who submit).

Radically, Taha argues that only prophetic individuals like Muhammad are *Muslim* while their followers never go beyond being *mu'miniun* (Mahmoud, 2006).

Taha's theory is predicated on certain suppositions: When God revealed the Meccan suras He knew they were inapplicable for that specific time and place, thus the Meccan suras hold higher status than the Medina ones: it is possible and necessary to de-abrogate abrogated segments of the Qur'an: in addressing the seventh century Arabs God spoke to all of humanity, and lastly humankind is now ready to accept and understand the primal message of the Quran, which are the Meccan suras ( Taha, 1987).

The Quran according to Taha is a temporal, esoteric entity rather than a space and time specific text. Advocating a gradualist cognitive strategy, Taha saw the Qur'an, which operated both historically, and trans-historically, as a practical book of guidance bringing humans step by step to God. Again, in opposition to orthodoxy, Taha does not believe that the meaning of the Qur'an is fixed. Although the Qur'an is transmitted and written in Arabic, Taha declares that its actual language is not Arabic but is the language of the souls; "The Qur'an has no language." The usage of Arabic is an accident of the historicity of revelation and so is a meditative tool, since the Arab audience needed to understand the Divine manifested in their own dialect. It is fundamentally wrong to presume that since the language of the Qur'anic text is Arabic that God speaks Arabic. Taha delineates that the Qur'an cannot solely be comprehended by relying on language and the mission facing modern Muslims is not one of engaging in tafsir (outward, surface interpretation) but ta'wil (inward deep interpretation). Taha's exegesis fractures the linguistic and cultural particularism of the Qur'an to position a universalism founded on common human symbols( Taha, 1987).





## Discussion

Commentary and interpretation of the Qur'an began as an oral transmission of hadith. However the tradition of using past commentaries as a reservoir of information resulted in a reproduction and glorification of past exegesis. The renewal of twentieth century Arab and Indo Muslim exegesis after a lag of approximately three hundred years was a result of colonial and post colonial forces. . Abduh was deeply influenced by Afghani, who as a result of interaction held a pan-Islamic vision for the Arabs. The exegetes explored in this section were living through periods of deep social, cultural and historical change. It may be argued that they were living in a liminal age, which promoted their Avanti-grade exegesis. The exegetes in this section demonstrate the rich diversity of discursive trends that have existed and still exist within Islam, but that were silenced and placed outside the borders of dogmatic enclosure.

## CHAPTER 6

### ISLAMIC FEMINISM AND QUR'ANIC EXEGESIS

Nyla and Farah

#### Introduction

The last 20 years have witnessed a blossoming of Qur'anic exegesis by Muslim women scholars (Stowasser, 1994). As the previous chapters have demonstrated, the lack of female exegetical presence in Islam is not wholly unexpected, as Muslim theology has predominantly been a male activity (El-80809019

Azhory Sonbol, 2001). Women scholars such as: Asma Barlas (2002), Nimat Hafez Barazangi (2004), Fatima Mernissi (1999), Asifa Quraishi (2000) and Amina Wadud (1999; 2005), have been collectively assigned the classification "Islamic feminists" and their commentaries have been designated "Islamic feminist interpretations". Whilst some of these women have embraced this categorization willingly, others have vehemently disavowed it. However, the situation has begun to undergo slow change, with many scholars willing to be identified as Islamic feminists. This chapter will explore different strands of inquiry in relation to Islamic feminism; what is Islamic feminism? Can feminism be Islamic? Why is there such an ambivalence against the term "feminism"? And finally what are the findings of the rereading of the Qur'an by these scholars?

#### What is Feminism?

What is feminism? There are many different ways of understanding this term and it is important to establish the contexts in which the designation of Islamic feminism signifies disparate meanings in different locations and periods. Thus, as Cooke (2001) states, feminism or Islamic feminism is not actually a consistent identity, but is a conditional, contextually driven, strategic self-positioning of actions, and behaviors. Personally, I agree with Badran (2001; 2007) who articulates feminism as an awareness of constraints placed on women, because of gender, the rejection of such limitation, and the willingness and desire to implement a more equitable gender system. The perspectives of the women I interviewed provide an interesting commentary on feminism and Islam.

### Nyla

Nyla is a twenty-three year old Bengali American college student. She was 21 when this project started, and at its conclusion she was about to graduate. A petite young woman, Nyla was vivacious, outgoing, and appeared quite assertive when among friends, of whom she has many. However, she indicated that she was very subdued in the company of people that were unknown to her. She loved clothes and makeup. Every occasion that I saw her, Nyla was wearing an outfit previously unseen by me, and was always fully made up. Although obviously very much into fashion, I never saw Nyla ever wear a skirt in my presence. "Aishwarya (Ashwayriah Rai, an Indian movie star) is my heroine!" was a phrase that peppered her sentences. Nyla indicated that "people" were always "freaked out" when they discovered that she was Muslim, "probably (because) of the entire make up" was her take on the situation. In Nyla's lexicon, "people" indicated non Muslims. When I asked if perhaps the fact that

her non observance of a hijab had something to do with it, she admitted that was a possibility. She indicated that “people” had commented that she did not “dress like a muslim”.

Nyla was born in the Middle East, where her father was working. Her family moved to the United States when she was 5 years old. Nyla was the youngest of three sisters and two sons. One brother and one sister were married. Both her parents were educators, although her mother stopped working just before I finished my study.

Very early on in our interviews Nyla Responded with an empathetic no when asked if she would classify herself as a feminist. She started to define feminism and then trailed off only to start again with:

I would define feminism...; I have somebody, she doesn't hate guys but if a guy starts speaking to a girl, she'll stand up and fight with him. Why? *I see a feminist as fighting for women's rights.* Fine, there's nothing wrong in fighting for women's rights, but there is a lot of stuff that men... of course that men do that I don't agree with and how they think about woman and stuff. But I don't think I'm a feminist. ..I can't, I can't analyze or define myself as a feminist (because) I'm not really sure how to define feminism so... *What I think of as feminism is being with a woman, all the time and doing this stuff with a woman, and taking approaches that a man would disagree with.* Or I know that the man would not like doing this or he does not accept it or like it, or can't deal with it. But for me I'm open. *I take a side from this and a side from that and I learn from it too.* So I just can't say I'm with a woman 24/7. Sometimes women, we are wrong too. I'm not saying on purpose, but then I don't know what feminism is. It's hard.

It is apparent that Nyla has a conflicted idea of what a feminist is or perhaps should be. She links feminism with multiple meanings: the urge to be with females uniformly: standing up to males: taking an approach that a male may disagree with: and fighting for women's rights. It is also apparent that she obviously does not believe that she is

performing any of the categories that she has listed. However, I think it is significant that she elucidate that she synthesizes material *"I take a side from this and a side from that and I learn from it too"*.

What is particularly interesting in regards to Nyla is that "strong" women abound in her family. Nyla's two aunts are single working mothers, who are supporting their families. In Nyla's Bengali community both women are accepted, are considered "normal" and both have a good social life. Nyla herself did not expressly view either of her Aunts as "abnormal". To her they were just "alone".

Both my aunts they are much stronger now. They're doing everything instead of when my uncles w(ere) here; the bills and everything...the kids rely on them as both mom and dad, so they really do not have time for a break... don't have time to stop and think" am I supposed to be doing this?" . Its tough but they are both doing it. So why wouldn't any other woman be able to do it?

In a different interview, approximately nine months later, I asked her if she thought she was a feminist. Nyla did not answer with an emphatic no this time. She surprised me by asking me what I thought was a feminist, and was I one! After hearing me answer that I considered myself a feminist and that I did not want to muddy her answers with my thoughts, she proceeded by saying:

I don't think that they should categorize ...they categorize people as Islamic people- what's the difference between a Christian person and (a Muslim). I don't think anybody is different that way. It's like that with feminism. I don't think there anything different...there are small things of course. But sometimes I hear people say "oh an Islamic person, or something happens and they blame it on an Islamic person. So maybe that's the same way with feminism...O.K., I mean, you know in our culture its not good to say you are feminist...your parents think that no one ill marry you (because) you admit that your feminist. O.K, maybe you can get away with saying it! You're already married!

Towards the end of the study I came back to the feminism question, again. I approached the query from a different angle. I asked Nyla, who had more power in Islam? Nyla was very emphatic that men had more power, but she surprised me by following up and by saying that:

That doesn't mean that's the way it should be. It's just the thing (that) we've been brought up to think...The Qur'an; it didn't give men the power. The men have more power. That's what I don't understand. I think men have taken the power, have taken advantage of that...I believe it (the Qur'an) made us equally, to be equal, but its how people analyze it (the Qur'an). Its how people were brought up, how their knowledge is. People grow up thinking "no, the man is more powerful, he is stronger in his words". So people have grown up thinking "oh all right, I guess the man is in charge"... But the Qur'an didn't put him in charge. We were never really taught another...a different view.

### Farah

Farah, a Bengali- American graduate student also stated that she found it hard to articulate what feminism is:

I don't think that we can define what feminism is because we are living in it. For example, if somebody out of our culture comes and lives with us for a week, they would notice our daily routines; what we do. They are going to notice the difference between how the man treats his woman, how the wife treats her husband and how she is a family woman. They are definitely going to notice the difference. I think for us, we don't realize what feminism is because its part of us, we can't separate" it from our daily existence" oh my God! What we are doing is really feminism! It's a part of us. I can't, because it's the way I've been brought up. The woman is always taking care of the house, taking care of her children, cooking, and cleaning.

The men are out working and come home, eat and sleep.  
That's my dad; what does my dad do?

Interestingly, Farah highlights a sentiment that is prevalent amongst “non-white” women; feminism is a lived experience, which changes with each community. Additionally, women may not be aware that their actions or thoughts could be classified as “feminist”. I had met both of Farah’s parents, and whilst her mother was a “traditional” homemaker, she appeared no way constrained either physically or verbally by her spouse. Farah’s mother genuinely appeared to love cooking, entertaining and taking care of her family. In another conversation Farah circled back to her father and gender roles again:

I respect my dad. I love him. But when I get married I would hope that my husband and I would share our roles. I wouldn't want him to rely just on me to do everything. I would hope. ..Share our roles to be one individual making a life instead of separating it into women's work and men's work. “Oh I'm the woman and he's the man” Laughs ...but it depends on what kind of person that he is, so I don't know it's hard.

### Islamic feminism

So, what then is Islamic feminism? There are two modes of classifying this term, an analytical mode and a nominal mode that uses the designation as an identity marker. As a nominal identity marker Islamic feminism is a communal identity against outsiders, usually perceived as westerners or western orientated Muslims. Thus the donning of hijab to show solidarity with “suppressed” Muslim communities around the

world is one example of Islamic feminism as an identity marker. As an analytical category, Islamic feminism is a vehicle for Muslims to counter female oppression as part of their Islamic faith (Badran, 2001; 2007). Thus, Muslim feminism is a faith-based scholarly process, whereby Islam is used to articulate, advocate, contextualize and interpret Qur'anic concepts of equity, equality and social justice, between men and women; and where freedom of choice plays an important part in expression of faith (Nourai-Simone, 2005). Additionally, I would say that it involves the element of the blossoming of a Muslim woman's (or a man's) consciousness, whereby their understanding of themselves and their situations as they relate to their, social, biological and religious condition are made clear and acted upon. Thus, Islamic feminism as an epistemology highlights the roles of religion and gender in the understanding of society and establishes an analytical apparatus for assessing how cultural expectations for men's and women's conduct have led to an unjust situation (Cooke, 2001). Academically:

Islamic feminism is a feminist discourse and practices articulated within an Islamic paradigm. Islamic feminism, which derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur'an, seeks rights and justices for women, in the totality of their existence "

(Badran, 2002: 17-23)

According to Badran (2002) Islamic feminism is being far more radical than secular feminism since demands full female equality across the public/private spheres. This is in contrast to secular feminists who have traditionally and perhaps pragmatically accepted the bifurcated concept of equality in the public domain and complementarism in the private one. (Badran, 2002). However, it would be unwise to imply that there is only one kind of laic feminist, as many of them are very strong



proponents of equality both in the public and in the private realm. Interestingly Badran does not specify what category of laic feminist she refers to. In many respects, Badran herself falls into the quagmire of classifying a very diverse group into a monolith.

Farzana was taken aback when the discussion on Islamic feminism entered our conversation. As an engineer, Farzana was forthright in her opinions that she had encountered a greater degree of professional difficulty, in the United States, than she had in BUET (Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology). She framed Islamic feminisms more as a personal disposition, saying:

Islamic feminism? I don't think it matters what you are, if you are a feminist it doesn't and shouldn't matter. It's just your personal view on life and what's going on around you. I believe that yes your religion, your culture will affect your opinions how you think about things. But for Islamic women, I mean Muslim women, I don't think it matters, what you call it, because it's just the way the role is; Either you are a strong woman or you're a woman just going with the flow, going with what your supposed to be doing. So, I don't think being a Muslim or a Hindu really affects it.

Farzana explained that she had an idea about *Amreka*, but that it was *bhul* (*wrong*). She explained that in many respects Bangladesh was advanced, in terms of the educational atmosphere. Farzana explained that at BUET she:

I never doubted my mind...I did the work; I was always near the top in exams... deshae (in Bangladesh) you are in [educational] competition all the time. I never thought that because I am a *maylok* (a respectable woman) that I cannot do this. That I was not worthy. ...I have felt that here in *amerika* I have to show them that in spite of being a *mayelok*, I am in the same intellectual class as them (the American men). I know I am their intellectual equal or better...Maybe

because we have woman engineers and doctors...we appreciate their ability to use their brains. In BUET, already you are among the best of the best. If I asked a classmate, a male classmate for their *katha* (notebook), they gave it. Even in that competition... yes maybe they were trying do *prem* (romance/ love) (laughs)...here in the classroom, *chelera* (young men) they do not want to give share their *kathas*. The professors [have a tendency] an attitude that says ...why are you (a woman) are here. I feel I have to prove more, work harder. ..They see you are a woman and they think you are soft...cannot do the same work.

I thought *ame chacree korley, ayeta cholee jabey* (when I become employed it will go away) but that has not happened. I see on many levels and times the (men) thinking their brain is smatter than me. They wonder if I am here [because] of my minority positions.

Nyla, in one of her beginning interviews, brings a different perspective and raises the issue of just who can or cannot define feminism. This point regarding authority and legitimacy was interwoven throughout the women's narrative. Nyla held the perspective that one could be both Muslim and a feminist. She states that:

I guess you can be Muslim and be feminist. That sort of woman wouldn't get married – they would be separating themselves. I actually don't know what feminism is. It's really hard for me because it's not like I don't understand it (the term). I can't know how to know (exactly) this is feminism and this is what feminism is. Well, I have always heard – I have a cousin that always says, "Oh you're a feminist, you hate us, you do. You don't agree with us. O.k. so I don't know what he thinks (about me) and what I'm supposed to think. So how am I supposed to know what feminism is. So it's hard you know to understand it, who interprets it (feminism) and how to interpret it.

Rokeya was verbal about feminism, declaring:

Feminists and feminism are not bad words, no, not at all! But I don't think that word should exist basically. Men should be equal to women and vice versa. Women shouldn't have to fight for their rights, it should be recognized that women have rights. Men have rights as well. Rights of women? Well things like equal pay yeah, equal rights, equal everything basically. There shouldn't be any discrimination (ary) factor between men and women I don't think. But unfortunately we live in the real world and there is discrimination. Why should people feel that it's a dirty word? They are not living in the real world then, are they? I expect Rafik to do his share. Fifty-fifty. If I do something he needs to do his share in the maintenance of this house. I don't mind cooking, he's crap at it! But then he has to hover and clean the bathrooms. Then he can do *namaz* (ritual set prayer)

Rokeya foregrounds the issue that even if a female does "women's work", it does not necessarily indicate that she is a "repressed traditional housewife". The point is not whether the work is men's work or women's work but rather the equitable distribution of those tasks. Moreover, the matter of inclination and natural abilities of each individual is brought into play by Rokeya's narrative.

### Critics of Islamic feminism

Critics of Islamic feminism contend that there cannot be gender equity within Islam and that the term Islamic feminism is itself an oxymoron. Consequently, they view religion and Islamic feminism as being mutually exclusive. Within Muslim diaspora communities two opposing groups regarding Islam feminism has coalesced: those articulating the possibilities of gender equity inherent within Islam and an Islamic schema, and citing the feasibility of the scholarly activists agenda (Mir-Hosseini, 1999; Najmabadi 2000;and ; Tohidi, 2003) and: those that stridently deny that scholars and

activists operating within an Islamic framework can be accurately or legitimately described as Islamic feminists (Moghissi, and Shahidian). The two opposing discourses are struggling to articulate what exactly they mean by feminism; is feminism a western concept and is feminism defined and understood only through the works of Euro Americans?

Although not specifying what is meant by the term “feminism”, Moghissi ( 1999) says that Islamic feminism has been utilized in “inaccurate and irresponsible” manner ; that all Islamic and intellectually active women are designated Islamic feminists” even though their activities might not even fit the broadest definition of feminisms” ( Moghissi, 1999 ). This is an interesting position as she appears to be articulating the idea that there can be only one correct definition of feminism; a secular one, totally separated from religion. Moghissi appears to be in accord with religious orthodoxy in articulating that only one correct legitimate perspective can exist. I would contend that Moghissi thus eclipses the contested nature of feminism. Similarly Shahidian (1999) is dismissive of attempts by female scholars to contour a feminist theology and reinterpretation of Islamic texts. He argues that these attempts at reinterpretation are futile since Islamic institutions, and orthodoxy are too powerful.

On the other side of the debate, Tohidi (1998) using Kandiyoti’s (1988) notion of “bargaining with patriarchy” theorizes that a renegotiation of gender roles can be achieved by female orientated reinterpretations of scripture. This argument focuses exclusively on Qur’anic exegesis to the exclusion of overt discussion of women’s secular roles since these exegetes undermine the orthodox agenda by working within the Islamic traditional framework.

## Problems of Being an Islamic Feminist

Principal exegetes of Islamic feminist discourse have been reluctant to identify themselves as Islamic feminists, since in the Muslim world "feminist" too often is a pejorative tantamount to "Western". There is deep ambivalence regarding the term. Ortner (1996) argues that using women as a bounded classification, that is distinct from or counter to "men" is apt to reproduce essentialist inclinations to reify gender. Instead of analyzing gender as one component among countless others, Ortner instead urges researchers to see the structural whole in which gender is embedded, and cautions that gender is never really a single unit of analysis. Simultaneously, Ortner cautions against negating the consequences and significance of gender as a category, since to do so would re-diffuse it into the haze of gender-insensitive "variables" from which it has just been "rescued" (Ortner, 1996, 138). Moreover, Ortner states that attempts to see feminism as meaningful, in the way that "Western/secular" women think it should be meaningful, often make the subject invisible within their own interpretative framework (Ortner, 1995). Barlas states that:

"To conservative Muslims, terms like anti-patriarchal, sexual inequality, liberation, and even hermeneutics- all of which I use liberally- smack too much of the epistemology of non-Muslim Others to be safely applied to themselves, let alone used in reading the Qur'an. Consequently, even though I engage Western/Feminist thought only circumspectly...my language and the mere act of engagement are likely to render me a "Western Feminist" in the eyes of those Muslims."

Barlas, 2002: xii)

For her part Wadud declares that:

“...I still describe my position as pro-faith, pro-feminist...because my emphasis on faith and the sacred prioritize my motivations in feminist methodologies”

(Wadud, 2005: 79-80)

Clearly feminisms and Islamic feminism are highly contested terms and the struggle to articulate them is simultaneously an endeavor to articulate how to be Western Muslim and a woman. Additionally it also speaks to the usefulness of labels such as feminists and feminism.

The exegetical methodology employed by female scholars' calls for, *ijtihad* (independent investigation of religious sources), linguistics, anthropology, history, literary criticism and sociology. By personally engaging with the Qur'an and analyzing its language, deconstructing specific *surahs*, and key words, these feminist scholars work to discredit the fallacy of patriarchy and violence against women. They argue that this is a myth that Western critics of Islam, colonialists, Western feminists, and Muslim males have all perpetuated (Ahmed, 1992).

Additionally the exegetes examined in this chapter counter the prevalent conservative Muslim view that that women's engagement is a Western ideology, which must be rejected to be true to Islam. However, for the Muslim female exegetes/feminists countering oppression to women is no more inherently Western than promoting human rights, or countering other forms of social injustice. For Muslim feminists and scholars, Islam contains within it the tools, with which to challenge oppressive social structures in whatever form they come, including oppressive patriarchal structures.

For the female scholars examined in this chapter, the epicenter of any pedagogy of self, life, liberty, and equality must start with Islam. The scholars whose work I explore feel that “Western feminism” either does not appreciate or is not willing to understand the significance that Islam plays in the lives of Muslim women. Colonialists have manipulated Islam as a weapon against subjugated peoples, and in a fashion Western Feminists have carried on this exercise (Ahmed, 1992). British and French colonizers bandied about the “woman issue” in the Islamic world as a cynical tool of conquer and divide, while concurrently denying women the right to vote, or own property back home until the late ninetieth and early twentieth centuries ( Ahmed, 1992).

Bina, a Bengali American states:

Islam for Muslims is not a thing apart from us, it cannot be separated from who we are, and it lives and breathes in us. Why would you want to separate it? *Amara Muslim na* (are we not Muslim?)? *Ami chainna je amar din amee faalieday!* (I don't want to throw my religion away).

This is the reason that an Islamic route to equality, equity, and justice is so attractive and vital for Muslim women, as it attempts to incorporate multiple aspects of the individual. To these scholars Western feminism appears unwilling either to accept or to understand why Islam can be the epicenter of any pedagogy of equality, equity, and justice for Muslim women. Ahmed (1992) makes the point that Islam has been co-opted cynically, manipulatively and naively by misogynist partisans of patriarchy, Western feminists and colonialists/ imperialists and it is time for Muslim women to claim it for themselves. All the women scholars examined below try to locate the equitable expression of Islam, and establish it as legitimate.

The scholars do not necessarily have a uniform exegetical methodology, in order to reassess gender equity in the Qur'an. They have all approached exegetical inequity from fundamentally similar positions but have utilized divergent tools to approach their goals. Barlas and Wadud have engaged with the Qur'an itself and read the text in two different manners but have arrived at a somewhat similar place, whilst Barazangi has engaged the Qur'an but has approached inequity from a pedagogical stance. However, each of these scholars contend that the Qur'an is a book for all ages that needs to be reinterpreted by each new generation in order to have relevance for Muslims. Furthermore, whilst they acknowledge that theirs are individual and thus deeply personal interpretations, the exegetes advocate that all Muslims have the authority and responsibility to read and interpret the Qur'an for themselves.

### Patriarchy

So what is patriarchy? Eisenstein defines it as the politics of sexual differentiation that privileges males by:

“transforming biological sex into politicized gender, which prioritizes the male while making the woman different (unequal), less than, or the “Other”.

(Eisenstein 1984:90)

Pateman on the other hand (1988:104) defines it as the “law of the Father, the untrammelled will of one man”.



Delaney put a twist on patriarchy. She defines patriarchy as the situation where fathers are exalted, as a direct result of their generative ability in procreation. Delaney argues that:

“Although women are necessary for procreation and are valued for their contribution to the process, men, in their procreative function, are associated with divine creativity and partake of its power and authority.”

(Delaney, 1995: 184)

Thus, symbolically man’s role in procreation is the mirror image of the divine monotheistic creation. Furthermore, man is the creative force in procreation, whereby he plants his seed in the female soil. In this paradigm, man is solely responsible for transmitting the divine spark of life. The woman does not add anything to this process, she is just the soil, the receptacle whose sole role is to nurture the seed (child) implanted in her.

What propels this notion, according to Delaney, is the idea of God as a “denaturalized or reified paternity”, and the father as a “naturalized divinity”. Thus God’s creativity is conducted through males to become a constituent of the definition of masculinity. Woman and nature are both created by God, who is symbolically masculine. Woman and nature thus are subservient to the masculine God. God as reified paternity and man as naturalized divinity are two points of a complex order that give the appearance that it is simultaneously natural and divinely ordained. Thus according to Delaney, when Abraham (man) obeys God:

“he submits to God’s will, Gods will flows through him and becomes identical; with his; male authority is invested with sacred power.”

(Delaney, 1998: 18)

In this system, God and man become identical, therefore woman, who is created by God, must submit both to God and man. Thus patriarchy as elucidated by Delaney is both sacred and secular (Delaney, 1998).

Working off Marshal Sahlins “culturalization of nature and the naturalization of culture” idea, Barlas (2002) narrowly defines patriarchy as historically particular form of rule by fathers that in:

“in its religious and traditional forms, assumes a real as well as well as symbolic continuum between the Father/farther”; that is, between a patriarchalized view of God as Farther/ male, and a theory of father-right, extending to the husband’ claim to rule over his wife and children. Thus patriarchy may be defined as the law of the father, where males, as a result of biology are privileged over females and have control and rights over females.”

(Barlas, 2002:12).

### Asma Barlas

Born in Pakistan and currently an Associate Professor and Chair of Politics for the study of Culture, Race, and Ethnicity at Ithaca College, Asma Barlas, was one of the first women allowed into the Pakistani Foreign Service. This locates Barlas firmly as an upper, middle class, western educated, female. However, her career was truncated, when General Zia ul Haq fired her for criticizing his military regime. She subsequently joined an opposition paper, but, fearing for her life, she fled Pakistan and applied for asylum in the United States.

In *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*, (2002), Barlas describes how inequality and discrimination occurs frequently amongst Muslims as a result of two conditions: lack of understanding when reading the Qur'an, or not reading it at all, and unquestionably accepting its patriarchal exegesis. Barlas's exegesis focuses on two questions: 1) does the Qur'an condone sexual inequality or oppression, and 2) does God have a special relationship with males or does the Qur'an challenge sexual inequality and patriarchy? Her exegesis answers with a negative on the first question and a positive on the second. She reveals, via hermeneutics derived from the Qur'an, that the Qur'an's epistemology is inherently anti-patriarchal and that it allows the reader to theorize essential equality of the sexes (Barlas, 2002). Basically Barlas returned to the text of Qur'an itself, and has interpreted the text without reference to earlier exegesis.

Labeling her exegesis an emancipatory and liberatory rereading of the Qur'an Barlas posits that all texts are polysemic and are thus open to multivariate readings. This is a fundamental underpinning in her argument, however my research indicates that the polysemic nature of the Qur'an is not a totally universally accepted concept amongst lay Muslims. The theory of multivariate readings of the Qur'an is accepted both by classical and modern in Qur'anic exegesis, as we have seen.

Arguing against an interpretive reductionist reading of the Qur'an, Barlas utilizes an exegetical methodology which she contends is advocated by the Qur'an itself. The principles of textual holism are emphasized by the Qur'an, which asks its readers to read for only the best meanings. Barlas articulates that The Qur'an warns against reading it in a de-contextualized, fragmentary, and selective manner. Moreover, the Qur'an distinguishes between readings that reflect on its clear / foundational *ayat*,

and those that draw on its obscure / allegorical ones. Therefore, according to Barlas only textually legitimate readings of the Qur'an will coalesce with the moral themes of the Qur'an's teachings. Legitimate interpretations treat the text as a unity, privilege its clear *ayat* over its obscure ones, and strive to circumvent ambiguity (Barlas, 2002).

Barlas attempts to read God's Speech by connecting it to God. She examines three elements of God's Self-Disclosure, which have hermeneutic implications and generate liberatory readings of the Qur'an: the principle's of Divine Unity: Justness, and: Incomparability. *Tawhid*, which is God's unicity, embodies God's Indivisibility, and by extension the indivisibility of God's Sovereignty. Thus it follows that *Tawhid* has an absolute meaning; God is absolutely sovereign, and no-one can share in God's Sovereignty. Barlas contends the doctrine of *Tawhid* undermines, - and destabilizes, - theories of father rule and father right (Barlas, 2002). *Tawhid* undermines father right and father rule, since they compete with divine supremacy.

The repercussions of *Tawhid* are far reaching in connection to men's hierarchal position over women. When men proclaim sovereignty over both women, and children, they misrepresent themselves as intermediaries between women and God, thus breaking the essential tenets of the doctrine of *Tawhid*, by attempting to partake in Gods sovereignty. Therefore, according to Barlas, any parallels between God, and males, in their scope as husbands and fathers, must be rejected as heresy (Barlas, 2002).

The doctrine of God's Justness may be extrapolated to argue that God never does any *Zulm* to anyone. According to Izutsu, do *Zulm* is to:

“act in such a way as to transgress the proper limit and encroach on the right of some other person”

(Izutsu, 1959:152)

Thus if God never does *Zulm* to anyone, then Barlas rationalizes that God's Speech cannot advocate or condone *Zulm* against anyone. This means that God's Speech, the Qur'an, also cannot by this definition be misogynist, or teach misogyny, or injustice. Barlas argues that patriarchies are manifest archetypes of *Zulm*, and as such, the Qur'an cannot condone them. Furthermore, Barlas states that an exegesis that reads patriarchy, oppression, and inequality, into the Qur'an (God's Speech), is a misleading and erroneous reading (Barlas, 2002).

That God is Incomparable, and therefore Un-represent able, is the third principle of God's Self-Disclosure. The Qur'an works very hard to establish the supposition that God cannot be represented in anthropomorphic, sexualized, and gendered terms (Barlas, 2002). So if God is not a male or like one, it can be concluded that God cannot have any special relationship to or with males that exclude females (Barlas, 2002).

As Barlas rereads it, the Qur'an challenges the founding myths of patriarchy rather than upholding them. Thus it does not inherently privilege masculinity, males, fathers, or father right/rule either biologically or culturally. This point is extremely significant for the activation of gender equity within Islam. Biology means nothing in the eyes of God. Thus males and females are fundamentally the same as God require the same spiritual and moral praxis from both sexes in this world, and they will each receive the same rewards in the next life according only to their deeds. Sura 9 states:

“The Believers, men  
And women are  
One of another: they enjoin  
What is just, and forbid  
What is evil: they observe  
Regular prayers, practices

Regular charity, and obey  
God and God's) Apostle.  
On them will God pour  
(God's) mercy: for God  
Is Exalted in power, Wise  
God hath promised to Believers,  
Men and women, Gardens  
Under which rivers flow,  
To dwell therein,  
And beautiful mansions  
In Gardens of everlasting bliss,  
But the greatest bliss  
Is the Good Pleasure of God:  
That is the supreme felicity".  
(9:71-72) (Translated by Asad, 1980).

If men are not biologically privileged in the Qur'an then, it must be understood that men are not biologically or culturally superior to women in this life or spiritually superior in the next. They are equal. A woman is not just an inferior man. If God does not privilege men in heaven then men cannot be superior in culture, which is man made (Barlas, 2002).

Barlas proceeds to the Qur'anic narratives of the prophets Muhammad and Abraham. Focusing on the Qur'an's refusal to consecrate either prophet as either real or symbolic fathers, Barlas demonstrates the Qur'an's repudiation of patriarchal imagery of God, the Father and patriarchal theories of father right/ rule. In the Qur'anic narrative, Abraham arrives at the Divine Truth via spiritual submission (Islam) and reasoning. The Qur'an, by foregrounding this dual process illuminates Abraham's

father's sin of *shirk* (extending God's Sovereignty to others) and compels Abraham to break with his father ( Barlas,2002).

Instead of displacing father right, and invalidating the imagery of the prophets as fathers, male exegetes in all three monotheistic religions read Abraham's narrative as solidifying his status as a patriarch. The prophet Abraham rejects both his father's authority and god's; challenging his father's patriarchal right, and telling his father to follow him. The polytheists reject God in order to adhere to patriarchal customs, which is the very practice that Abraham, with God's approval, condemns (Barlas, 2002). Barlas asserts that it is the break with his father which is pivotal to Abraham's embrace of God. When God rewards Abraham with prophethood, He designates Abraham an *imam* (etymologically related to *ummah* / community and *ummah* / mother), a gender neutral term, rather than anointing him a symbolic patriarch / ruler. Therefore, the Rule of God (monotheism,) must take precedence over the rule of fathers (patriarchy). Barlas contends that in order for God's Rule to exist, the father's (Abraham's father) rule must be demolished, to be replaced by God's Rule (Barlas, 2002). Thus the Quran dislocates father rule and patriarchy. In conclusion, Barlas believes that Muslims exegetes have not read, or are not willing to read the Qur'an as an anti-patriarchal text, as a consequence of their own heavy investment in patriarchy (Barlas, 2002).

### Nimat Hafez Barazangi

Nimat Hafez Barazangi is of Syrian decent is currently a research fellow at Cornell University. Barazangi's work is very critical as she makes the linkage between

production and consumption of Islamic knowledge by women Barazangi frames her exegetical understanding upon an epistemological reading of the Qur'an:

the methodologies of the discipline of education and learning and the struggle for human dignity that define the parameters for Muslim woman's emancipation are grounded in that framework

(Barazangi, 2004:28).

She states that women's access to formalized Islamic knowledge and Qur'anic interpretation is mandated by the Qur'an.

The backbone of Barazangi's exegesis is the Muslim concept of *khalifah*. As the Qur'an delineates that the *khalifah* is God's deputy, steward or vice-regent on earth. Thus, according to the Qur'an, each individual (male or female) is a *khalifah* to God, and must strive to adhere to and advance God's will by founding a society that is reflective of human dignity and justice. God gave human beings the necessary intelligence, strength, and divine guidance to fulfill their *khalifah* duties. In order for Muslim women to execute their *khalifah* duties, Barazangi believes that they must be engaged with Qur'anic exegesis and jurisprudence. Muslim women's lack of exegetical engagement and reliance on the interpretation and interpretative process of others threaten to negate their *Khalifah* roles, spirituality and God given right to understand, choose, and to act within Islam (Barazangi, 2004).

In order to participate and gain full access to *din* (faith), the Qur'an repeatedly demands that both Muslim men and women participate in the interpretative and pedagogical dynamics of the Qur'an. Religious knowledge directly translates to power and authority (Barazangi, 2004). Barazangi finds that her rereading of the Qur'an indicate five fundamental principles that apply to all individuals: creation of male and



female from a single soul/being: the individual right and obligation to be educated: the right and responsibility to accept or reject Islam: the ability to dispense and receive inheritance: and inclusion in the Islamic brother/sisterhood, with no distinction to as to gender, race, class or color (Barazangi, 2004). These five principles permeate the *khalifah* life and consciousness in making moral and intellectual choices in a just society. Therefore, Barazangi argues that the universal principles of human action necessitates that believing men and women place a high priority on individual Qur'anic exegesis and strongly advocates the recognition of females as active partners in the educational and interpretative process (Barazangi, 2004).

### Amina Wadud

Amina Wadud's research aims to ensure that "Muslim women are the subject and object of their own discourse" (Wadud, 1999:9) Until recently an Islamic Studies professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University (1992-2007), Wadud has been a leading proponent in the rereading of the Qur'an in order to reclaim it for women. She converted to Islam, from Christianity in college first joining the Nation of Islam and thereafter becoming a Sunni Muslim.

Although Wadud's influential exegesis *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Scared Text from a Woman's Perspective* (1999) is incredibly influential, she is perhaps best known for her activism, in the movement to open up strictly male mosque spaces for women. She recently led a mixed prayer assembly, which drew encouragement and

virulent protest from all over the world ([www.muslimwakeup.com](http://www.muslimwakeup.com)). The whole concept of a woman leading a prayer, mixed sex or otherwise has become a topic of fierce debate in contemporary Muslim society. Although Rokeya did not have any knowledge of “Amina Wadud and the mixed prayer incident” her views on the subject were supportive of Wadud’s position:

I don’t see any reason why a woman can’t be an Iman, unless it’s outlawed in the Qur’an. I don’t see any reason why she shouldn’t. Do people have a problem with it? What?

Nyla, towards the later part of the study indicate that she had heard about Wadud. Nyla brought up the nature of the controversy indicating that:

There was a lot of debate, you know [saying] that’s not right, a woman can’t do that and have her voice heard just like a mans. You know all this stuff. But just [because] she’s a woman; I don’t know why she cannot do it [lead the prayer]. [It is because] it’s not a well-known thing that a woman can lead a prayer [because] we’ve been raised [to think] that it’s always a man that has to lead. So we don’t think about that a woman really can do this...so I don’t think it’s a sin for a woman to do this. [Just because] it does not happen in our community, not in our culture. It does not say so in the Qur’an.

Jasmine had also heard of Wadud. She was stated that;

I go to the *masjid* [mosque] at *Eid* (special celebrations. If I was home I would be spending it with my family. But here I am alone, so I like to go, to [reconnect]. It's nice to see everyone dressed up. But it’s always [a rushed affair] need to be back in school or work...I am disappointed ...go looking for warmth, home and it’s always not a good experience...O.K. sometimes it is. ...

I think she is a knowledgeable woman. You know, during Ramadan when you have the people with the most knowledge lead the *namaz* (prayer) and *kauthba* (sermon)? There was a big controversy, people saying, "How can you have a woman lead the *namaz*? Guys in Saudi Arabia freaking out. Why would a woman do that? We can't have her voice be heard...I wanted to know why she couldn't lead. [Because] God made her a woman? He made her, so do you think God would make somebody unworthy to ...Why are they [men] afraid of us? I know that there are women Imams. In my history class I[learnt] that women prayed in the same masjid with men when [Muhammad] was alive...So I looked her up. She is a professor of religion. So do these guys, they work as engineers, and doctors [think] they know more about Islam? More than someone who studies it all the time? ...I don't think that there's anything bad or weird about a woman leading a prayer congregation. Do you...I think it's good for us [for Islam and Muslims] to have some controversy; it makes people talk about talk about [about the issue].

Interested in gender jihad (her own phrase), Wadud's exegesis endeavors to locate the question of gender equality in the *weltanschauung* (world view) of the Qur'an. Wadud reread the Qur'an, vowing not to be a Muslim if anything in the Qur'an implies the inferiority of women. Emphasizing a Qur'anic hermeneutics that is inclusive of female experiences and voice, Wadud, attempts to foreground gender justice in the Qur'an (Wadud, 1999). In order to demonstrate the significance of the important Qur'anic concepts and principles, Wadud proceeds with textual analysis of the Qur'an. Wadud shows that words, particles, syntax of verse and their contexts are all part of the multilayered exegetical process of the Qur'an. Thus words utilized in the Qur'an must be examined in the context of the overall Qur'anic world view. Wadud is especially critical of the inclination in Qur'anic exegesis, as well as other disciplines, to construct the normative human from the perspectives and experiences of males. Within this assemblage, women are measured against men, reinforcing the erroneous concept that

males are the benchmark of humanity. By extension this line of reasoning implies that only men are fully human.

Wadud has comprehensive training in classical Arabic from al-Azhar and her work is based on reasoning formed on language and meaning. Her rereading mirrors Zamakshari's exegesis in its stress on language and linguistic discourse. Wadud addresses the dynamics between Qur'anic universals and particulars. She explores the ways that the text was restricted in the Arabic language, rejecting the formation of Arabic as a sacred language. Wadud contends that the Qur'an was revealed in Arabic, in a specific time and place in order to make revelation comprehensible to its immediate audience (speakers of seventh century Arabic).

Wadud articulates that every appellation in Arabic is expressed in gendered terms. Thus the question must be addressed, how can ideas that transcend gender be expressed in gendered language? According to Wadud seventh century Arabian particulars should be restricted to that specific context unless a broader foundation of understanding and application can be developed from them. In order to look systematically at the relationship between universals and particulars Wadud foregrounds the Qur'an's usage of particular terms. She examines each term on the basis of its language act, syntactical structures, and textual context in order to determine the parameters of meaning. This requires a dual process: keeping words in context and referring to the larger textual development of the term.

Wadud is highly critical of the atomistic approach, which applies meaning to one verse at a time, with references to various verses in the Qur'an. She condemns this approach to analysis that traditional male exegetes undertook, Wadud advocates a hermeneutics of *Tawhid* to emphasize the way the unity of the Qur'an permeates all of

its parts. In utilizing a hermeneutical *Tawhid*, Wadud develops a systematic framework that correlates and exemplifies Qur'anic coherence (Wadud.1999). Essentially she engages in an interpretation of the Qur'an based on the Qur'an itself.

Wadud's engagement with the Qur'an hinges on the position that in Islam, a female was intended to be primordially, cosmologically, eschatologically, spiritually and morally a full human being, equal to everyone who accepted Allah as Lord, Muhammad as prophet, and Islam as *din* (religion). Wadud critiques the Islamic intellectual ethos that developed without giving clear and resounding attention to the female voice as part of the Qur'an and a response to it. She hypothesizes that historically this lack of attention has resulted in negating the female voice and, in addition has made it *Awrah* (taboo).

A good example of her methodology is demonstrated below, where Wadud textually analyzes a Qur'anic verse detailing the creation of Adam and Eve. This is an important exercise as Wadud works to clarify a number of what she regards as erroneous Muslim notions regarding women: that woman (Eve) was created from man (Adam), thus giving all men a priori superiority over all women. According to this interpretation, women are neither physically nor spiritually perfect: and woman (Eve) was the cause of man's downfall. The italicized words are Wadud's reading of the Arabic words.

"And min (*from*) His ayat (*divine sign*) (*that is :*) that He created you (*humankind*) min a single nafs (*soul*), and created min (*that nafs*) its zawj (*mate*), and from these two he spread (*through the earth*) countless men and women." (4:1)

(Wadud, 1999:17)

Wadud's reading of Eve is diametrically different from traditional male exegetes, who had/have relied upon Judeo-Christian tradition to give them background information on Adam and Eve (Eve is not mentioned by name in the Qur'an). Wadud reading views Eve (woman) as being created from the same neuter soul as Adam (man) and not from Adam. Eve (woman) becomes Adam's (man) mate; she is the congruent half of the pair (*zawj*). Eve (woman) thus is Adam's (man) gender equal by virtue of a gender-neutral soul that Allah breathes into all humanity equally. Thus Eve (woman) is physically and spiritually perfected, like Adam to become Allah's vice-regent (*khalifah*) on earth. However, there is an interesting aspect to this analysis; *nafs* is feminine, thus to read this correctly Wadud states that it would read:

*"And min (from) His ayat (divine sign) (that is :) that He created you (humankind) min a single nafs (soul), and created min (that nafs) (her) zawj (mate), and from these two he spread (through the earth) countless men and women. "(4:1)*

(Wadud, 1999:17)

The repercussions from Wadud's reading suggest that rather than the primordial man, Allah created the primordial woman!

Nyla recounts the creation story, which she believes is written in the Qur'an, below:

Isn't it that Adam was on earth first and Eve came out of what you call it? The ribs, and that's how it all started. (Very hesitant and then laughs). .. wasn't it the devil ...they got expelled , let out of the garden...I think that maybe it was Allah that made him eat the apple and just you know...She gave him the apple, we got all the pain. I've heard people say that, but I've never really understood why they would say that. What's the concept of saying that, this is how we're made, so I don't really think or focus on it?"

“Well like they say you can’t live with them and you can’t live without them! (Hysterical laughter) I would think that they are made for each other. It’s just that the thing is how they were made, why was Adam on the earth? You would think it would be the opposite, he needs to come out of her instead of she coming out of his rib because thinking how a woman’s body works I guess, but that’s just the weird thing, but I can’t, I don’t know how to explain that.

Nyla was extremely hesitant about recount the creation myth. She said that she knew that since women were made from Adam that we were looked at as “second class citizens”. Nyla was convinced that the story of the ribs was in the Qur’an and appeared to be extremely conflicted as to how to resolve the issue to her. In particular, notice Nyla’s utilization of her knowledge of human reproduction and biology to articulate that perhaps it should have been woman who was created first. The phrase “ so I don’t really think or focus on it “ was used by her any time she could not reconcile what she considered “ Muslim “ teaching with her own personal world-view. .

In Comparing Nyla’s narration with Farah’s we can see some differences.

Funny you ask me that...I got sick of my brother getting on me...I went through the Qur’an, really went through...probably the first time I ever really read through it cover to cover. That story, you know how *Howah* (Eve) was made out of Adam’s rib? Its not there! Did you know that? That thing is not in there! *Howah* (Eve), if that’s her name at all isn’t in there...I mean she’s there, well a woman is there, Adam’s wife, but she doesn’t have a name. I researched it, after that. It was driving me crazy because all my life I’d heard that man got made first. Where did it come from? I researched it on the net. It’s from the Bible! Can you believe that! I have started reading bits of the Qur’an now. .

Farah is more confident in articulating that the creation myth is not actually what has been passed on to her. Maybe, as a consequence of the fact that she is a student, Farah initiated an investigative process to discover the source of the Adam and Eve story. It is particularly noteworthy that rather than doubting her faith, her research and its results actually make her more engaged in the Qur'an.

Sara brings up the factor of women's responsibility in the Qur'an, Islam's influence on that responsibility, women's rights, and the way that culture impinges on it:

When I read the Qur'an I feel that the woman is relied on much more than the man. You would think that women would have more things in life to do than a man would do. So you would think that she has more priority- but from the culture that some people are raised in or depending on how they've been raised a woman has no priorities over a man...so I think culture is an influence.

I don't think that Islam is detrimental to women. It's the people or where you are in the world that ties you down...your culture and how that society interprets Islam. How people take in things and think about what a woman is supposed to be doing and what she is not supposed to be doing! But ... in the Qur'an, men and women are equal; even though I think women have more power than men. I don't know how (laughs). I don't know I feel the woman has more rights to certain things that men don't- like for instance- oh - I don't know the example, that's how I think. I don't think that Islam actually separates men and women's rights, it's the people, how they translate, how they live their daily life.

In the narrative describing the temptation of the couple by Satan, the Qur'an consistently utilizes the Arabic dual form in articulating how Satan tempted both Adam and Eve jointly and how they both disobeyed. In maintaining this dual form, the Qur'an overcomes the negative allegations that Eve (women) was the root of evil and Adam's



(men's) downfall. The usage of the dual form stresses the Qur'anic importance placed on individual responsibility. According to Fazlur Rahman, the Qur'an:

“States repeatedly that every man and woman individually and every people collectively are alone responsible for what they do”

(Fazlur Rahman, 1980: 19).

Although in the creation narrative it is stressed that that the male and female are essential contingent characters in the conception of humankind, no definite cultural functions or roles are defined at the moment of creation. All Allah delineates are particular qualities universal to all humans and not specific to one particular gender or to any specific people from any exact time or place (Wadud, 1999).

### Discussion

The female scholars examined in this chapter are obviously still within Muslim exegetical community as they are working within the frameworks established by the classical exegetes. However, all the scholars the feminist scholars view the text as not fixed but open to multiple and shifting interpretations. At the beginning of this chapter I noted that Badran (2001) saw feminism as an awareness of constraints placed on women, because of gender, and the rejection of such limitation, and the willingness and desire to implement a more equitable gender system. In the analysis of the ethnographical material presented in this chapter multiple themes begin to coalesce vis-à-vis feminism, Islam and Muslim women in the West. The terms feminism and feminists can be extremely slippery to define or grasp. Each woman gave a slightly

variant definition of what she felt the words meant to her. What is apparent is that all the women are aware that their society and culture placed limitations on them as a consequence of their gender. What surprised me in the analysis of the material is the lack of blame actually placed on their faith for those limitations.

## CHAPTER 7

### Everyday Woman's Exegesis

#### Introduction

This dissertation explores if and in what capacities vernacular transnational South Asian Muslim women are engaged in feminist interpretations or exegesis of the Qur'an. Feminist academic literature focusing on Muslims societies, have generally gravitated towards conceptualizing agency as oppositional to normative sociocultural and legal standards, in particular religious norms. Muslim women are often depicted as objects of patriarchal constructions, specifically fundamentalist discourses and practices. Exhibiting an ahistorical and acultural impulse, Judith Butler (1997) presupposes that there is a universal and organic longing for freedom; freedom as expressed and defined by Western feminists. Saba Mahmood (2004) however, negates Universalist tendencies, and encourages researchers to pay attention to the particulars, the historical, sociocultural, and political, nature of agency amongst Muslim women, whether it is to resist normative values or to uphold them,

In her critical ethnography of the female mosque movements in Cairo, Mahmood demonstrates that agency may be viewed as the rigorous effort to internalize religious dispositions. However, agency may also be delineated as "the meaning, motivation and purpose which, individuals bring to their activity, *their sense of agency, or "the power within"* (Kabeer, 1999: 440). The idea of "agency" must be viewed simultaneously with the notion of empowerment, as an entity to be taken by the individual and not a thing to be given (Longwe 2000:30). Empowerment in this formulation is thus defined as "the process of challenging existing power relations, and *of gaining greater control over the sources of power"* (Longwe, 1994: 130).

Moreover, the above definitions of agency and empowerment assume a dynamic and personal engagement by the individual, whereby the person is empowered through his or her own achievements. In order to comprehend Muslim women's own understanding of their lives, this ethnography attempted to perceive how women

operated with and saw themselves in a religious environment and what role religion played in their lives. A major source of power in Muslim societies is the Qur'an and these multi-sited ethnographic interviews allowed me to capture a richly complex picture of women's participation with the Qur'an. These interviews sought to elucidate religiosity as a primary motif, within the shifting cultural, economic and political life of women of the Muslim diaspora.

In this chapter, I will analyze how women who participated in my study interpreted individual *ayats* and the Qur'an and compare them with the "official interpretations". It will become clear that the women are interpreting the Qur'an, in very diverse and complex ways.

#### Miriam's Interpretation

A young man in the British Bengali community had recently become married. The wedding had been a large and an extravagant affair. Everybody had attended. The bride was very beautiful, polite and adorned with glittering gold. The young man's parents were prominent in the community and he had been considered the bachelor all the young women wanted to marry. The young man had looked at all the girls in the community at one point or another but he had been "too fussy". However on a trip to the United States he had met a young Bengali American woman and proposed. However, a week later the bride suddenly left her husband, returned to America and started divorce proceedings. The community was agog. What had happened? Slowly the details leaked out. The nice young man had begun hitting his wife on their wedding night and after a week she left.

A couple of days later I saw Miriam. As I came into her sitting room, Miriam jumped up and told me that she had been waiting for me; she wanted to read me an ayat in *surah Baqara* that had spoken to her. Miriam's living room was a very large rectangle, decorated in a light lemon and mint green. There were no pictures on the wall, a huge mirror hung over the mantelpiece, while an equally large reproduction of *surah Fatiha*, (the opening *surah* of the Qur'an) on a papyrus scroll, hung opposite. A beautifully craved sideboard overflowed with pictures of her family. We sat down, the 52 inch television was on; it was always on, mostly tuned onto "the Bangla Channel," any time Miriam or her husband was in the room. In fact, both Miriam and Polly were very politically aware in regards to the situation in Bangladesh and were quite expressive in articulating their political views.

We sat down on a very plush, very wide, lemon-colored sofa. Miriam began to read the Qur'an that was in her hand, the Bangla translation written underneath each Arabic line. Miriam's head was loosely covered with a blue and white *unna*, a long diaphanous material usually part of the *shalwar chemis*, the shirt and trouser garments commonly worn in South Asia. Although, Miriam wore saris, during the day she wore *shalwar Kameez*, which were *porthey subeda*, (easy to wear) to do housework and *namaz*. When Miriam was not praying, she usually had the *unna* loosely knotted around her neck.

Suddenly in the midst of reading the Arabic, Miriam stopped to tell me of an incident involving a dear friend of hers, who had not come to her aid when Miriam needed help. The incident was not a serious situation, and had not impacted the friendship at all; in fact according to Miriam the friend was totally unaware that there had been an "incident" at all. Miriam resumed reading the Qur'an. The reading followed a particular pattern, she would read the Arabic lines out loud, reciting it,

mostly from memory, although Miriam would then she would read the Bangla translation and commentary to me before commencing with her own “translation “of the line. Many times the Bangla translation and Miriam’s interpretation diverged, not widely, and not in essence but in emphasis. Eventually Miriam broke off the exegesis, as news of political demonstrations breaking out in Dhaka, Bangladesh filled the television screen. I have given the English translation of the ayat of surah Baqara that Miriam read below. The translation is by Muhammad Asad:

#### Al-Baqara

Those who spend their possessions (for  
The sake of God) by night and by day,  
Secretly and openly, shall have their reward  
With their Sustainer; and no fear need  
they have, and neither shall they grieve (274)

Those that gorge themselves on usury  
Behave but as he might behave whom  
Satan has confounded with his touch; for  
They say “Buying and selling is but a kind  
of usury”- the while God has made  
buying and selling lawful and usury  
unlawful. Hence, whoever becomes aware?  
of his Sustainer’s admonition, and thereupon  
desists (from usury), may keep his  
past gains, and it will be for God to judge  
but as for those who return to it-  
they are destined for the fire, therein to abide! (275)

God deprives usurious gains of all  
Blessing, whereas He blesses charitable  
deeds with manifold increase. And God  
Does not love anyone who is stubbornly  
ingrate and persists in sinful ways (276)

Verily, those who have attained to faith

And do goodworks, and are constant in prayer, and dispense charity- they shall have their reward with their Sustainer, and no fear need they have and neither shall they grieve. (277)

O you who have attained to faith! Remain conscious of God, and give up all outstanding gains from usury, if you are (truly) believers (278)

For if you do it not, then know that you are at war with God and His Apostle. But if you repent then you shall be entitled to (the return of) your principal: you will do no wrong, And neither shall you be wronged. (279)

If, however (the debtor) is in straitened circumstances, (grant him) a delay until a time of ease; and it would be for your own good- if you but knew it-to remit (the debt entirely) by way of charity. (280)

And be conscious of the Day on which you shall be brought back unto God, where upon every human being shall be repaid in full for what he has earned, and none shall be wronged (281)

Below is the interpretation of the above lines by Miriam:

I read this ayat a couple of days ago. I wanted you to hear it. After you do good work, after you give charity, and then you must never ever say in your life; come and say it out aloud to the person, never say I did this for you. I gave this to you-

*Namaz* is so important, its Allah's *haq* (the responsibility humans owe to God). Did you understand what I mean by *Haq*, *namaz ruza zakat* (prayer, fasting, and alms giving) ...*manusher haq* (people's responsibility) is what Shoma (name of Miriam's friend) needed to do for me, which was her *haq*. Its just not *namaz, ruza*, this *manusher haq* is what gets you *swab* (blessing). If someone is doing lots and lots of

*namaz*, but is not doing this responsibility to people, than they are loosing *swab*, they are becoming losers. All this *swab* is not going to their *amol*; do you understand. ...

Miriam reads in Arabic ... then reads the Bangla translation and commentary:

It deals with, it's saying ...*shood ne ah bolta sai*, the interest that you are getting from the bank, don't take it, let it go, let it go. If you believe me, *Jodi tumara beshashi hoo* (if you are faithful),

Miriam reads ...reads in Arabic ... then reads the Bangla translation and commentary:

If you ...everybody eats interest from the bank, you doesn't see anyone that doesn't eat it, I see everyone doing it. Allah is saying is if you don't give it up, then you are fighting with Allah and the *Rusul*. But if you ate, ate lots of it and now said *tauba, tare kai bo na* (I will not take it any more) then Allah will forgive you. See, there is nothing that Allah will not forgive. Stop doing it and He will forgive. See how so very very good He is.

Miriam reads in Arabic ... then reads the Bangla translation and commentary:

It's saying don't do any *autthachar* (aggression/ wrong doing) with anyone, with your neighbors, your relatives, and your friends and also don't become *autthachai hoi oh na*, don't become the oppressed; you don't become that as well! See it that way as well. Did you understand *autthachar*? Tell me what I mean by *autthachar*?

I replied, "It means not to oppress anyone"

*Heh* (yes). Don't fall into that position as well; don't let it happen to you. Think very deeply. What a *sunder kautha Allah bolsay* (beautiful way Allah phrased it). Those that fall into that position, let themselves fall into oppression, Allah doesn't think well of them either. So Allah is saying two things, don't oppress and don't be oppressed. *Tik na kautha* (isn't it the right thought/ word).

Miriam starts to read in Arabic... looks up:



It is important with *Qur'an Sharif*, everyday you have to read it or else you will forget it

Miriam reads in Arabic ... then reads the bangla translation and commentary:

If you give someone *rin* (loan), Amerika and in England, this doesn't happen, everyone borrows money from the Bank...so if Molly said, "Please give me a loan? When I get money I will pay you back. It does not mean I gave the money for good to Molly, but when she has the capacity, she will give it, the money, back. In the *Qur'an Shurib* it's called *rin*. Did you understand? So this ayat, the first part is saying, don't oppress and don't be oppressed. That you understood. Well, this is saying the loan you gave Molly, money koru (think that) you give *sadquaa* (monetary charity) to Bobita, the *daan* (charity) you give to Bobita, that you will never get back from her. But what Allah is saying here, is that you didn't really give to Bobita, you gave it to Him. And you will get your *daan* back in the next life. Did you understand? But it's not talking about *daan* here. Allah is talking about the loan you gave Molly "if you understood how good it is for your soul to give loans." Every single day that Molly didn't give the money back, to me then, every single day the *swab* is going to fill up my *amol*. It's like a bank, but the interest is collecting with God as blessings

Miriam reads in Arabic ... then reads the bangla translation and commentary:

We give money monthly to (names a relative), so that they can build up their business, Allah is saying here that until that *lok* (person) is settled, established, until then you can ask for that money back, that's what Allah is saying

Miriam reads in Arabic ... then reads the bangla translation and commentary:

It is saying every single one of you, you fear that day that everything. That you did on the Earth, on that day I will return it to you. And on that day, no-one will be able to oppress anyone or be oppressed. ...Wait wait, look what's happening...

The huge television screen filled up with images of Bangladeshi police in riot gear breaking up crowds of demonstrators.

The politicians in Bangladesh, *orra zaa autthachar cortasey manusher ooperay* (they are really oppressing the people). How can they call themselves a Muslim country...?

Our discussion quickly turned to the always volatile political situation in Bangladesh.

### Analysis of Miriam's interpretation.

This verse of surah al-Baqara is concerned with usury (*riba*), specifically forbidding Muslims from taking or leveraging interest. The *ayat*, previous to this one involved charity and may explain why Miriam chose to highlight aspects of charity and giving in her interpretation. Miriam opened the interpretation with a little monologue informing about the responsibilities that human beings have towards God and also towards each other. Additionally, she added the narration about her friend, Shoma's failure to uphold her human responsibility to Miriam. I found it insightful that Miriam could have entwined the narration to the commentary later, but she chose to set it apart, allowing me to reflect on it as I listened to her. In many ways, Miriam's exegesis reflected much of the oral tradition of story telling; pulling threads from multiple directions to finally make a holistic cogent narrative.

For Miriam, the Qur'an is not just there to outline Muslims responsibilities to God in performing all the rituals of Islam, prayer, fasting and almsgiving. It also functions as a tool to help humans understand their responsibility to one another. A deeply devout woman Miriam undertook all the rituals of Islam promptly. However, she made clear that by not discharging their responsibilities to other humans, even devout Muslims were not living up to their potential and were becoming "losers".

Lest we think that Miriam may not have understood that this *ayat* is concerned with usury, notice how she employs words and descriptions alluding to banks and money. All throughout this commentary, Miriam's uses of similes suggestive of banks, and money, makes her interpretation more appealing and pertinent. In the second portion of the commentary, Miriam again utilizes banking imagery. Even though the Bangla line actually translates as "don't take interest", by stating "the interest you are getting from the bank" Miriam in actuality is reflecting her historical, cultural, and social position, since in her world view, banks are the only institutions that give or charge interest. This perspective is shaped to some degree by her socio-cultural situation as Miriam's family contains doctors, engineers and bankers, but is devoid of people involved in commerce. When this *ayat* was written, the largest proportion of the audience was made up of traders. It is striking that Miriam's use of the words "let it go, let it go" which transmits the impression of interest as concrete wealth. In later conversations she notes, that the bad deeds that individuals perform in this life will become a living thick snake, endlessly squeezing the person in the next life.

The third segment of the interpretation again echoes Miriam's worldview and her historical, cultural, and social position when she asserts that everyone around her takes interest. This is a moment where the complexity and messiness of Islamic ideology and doctrine and the lived reality of a Muslim woman's life appear to collide. Although, Muslims say they follow the Qur'an strictly and adhere strictly to Islamic doctrines, there are numerous instances when the lived actuality fails to match theological ideology. Miriam's interpretation reflects this fundamental truth. She is sober regarding the matter.

A young American Bangladeshi woman related how her parents, on first moving to the United States were vehement in their opposition to taking interest. However, the

situation soon changed, with the woman's father not only taking interest but also charging interest in his business dealings. The daughter was deeply conflicted since she perceived this failure to live up to Islamic ideology, as the same Islamic betrayal of principle that her parents accused her of, when they became upset at her for "wanting to live like a non Muslim".

It is interesting that Miriam's equates the taking of interest to actually eating it, thus the imagery is suggestive of something that is potent and harmful, and the ingested interest is slowly poisoning and killing the individual. Additionally Miriam's word usage mirrors Asad in many respects since he uses the word, "gorge, in reference to interest. I think it is interesting that Miriam put the word *Taubah* to work in this passage as *Taubah* is not a word per se but rather serves an expression of extreme disgust and repudiation.

I want to look at the next segment of Miriam's interpretation as it appears to verge fundamentally from Asads. If taken out of the context of the gossip taking place in the Bengali community regarding the spousal abuse that had just occurred, Miriam's interpretation may appear vague and certainly not feminist. However once the cultural and historical context is foregrounded, we can appreciate the interpretation differently. She places a great deal of emphasis on the concept of aggression. In reviewing the *ayat*, the only position where the word can be placed is in the two lines. "You will do no wrong and neither shall you be wronged". In Assad's interpretation, the line, word utilization and emphasis all appear quite mild. But Miriam places greater stress here and uses a much harsher Bangla word *autthachar*. I have indicated that *autthachar* can mean "wrong doing" but it is a very strong word, with a heavy sentiment attached to it and I have only heard it utilized with a connotation of aggression and force.

Out of one and half lines Miriam has unpacked an enormous amount of meaning. Wrong, in Bangla is actually “*bhul*” not *autthachar*, the word that Miriam has used here. However, in many respects Miriam’s usage is appropriate to the feelings that usury inflicts on people in Bangladesh, especially very poor people, on whom it has long had a crushing effect. Additionally, what intrigues me is that Miriam uses the word *autthachar*, expanding and layering it, to mean the oppression of one’s neighbors, friends and families. She ties it back to her introductory statements and story regarding Shoma’s lack of responsibility to her and the topic of people’s responsibility to each other and to God.

Miriam then goes much further in her exegetical exposition of these two lines, than Assad or the Bangla commentary which merely echoed Assad. This fraction of Miriam’s interpretation is especially fascinating in relation to her consciousness opening up and also in terms of agency. Miriam makes the connection between the oppressed and the oppressor. She places a great deal of emphasis on not allowing yourself as a person to get oppressed, which is especially important in understanding whether Miriam is “undertaking a feminist interpretation of the Qur’an.

As stated in the previous chapter, Badran defines Islamic feminism as a praxis that seeks rights and justice for women by articulating that mandate as it occurs in the Qur’an (Badran, 2001). While Miriam does not address women intentionally, she says that all people (men and women) have rights that are mandated by the Qur’an. And if anyone violates those rights in the case of any person, then the Qur’an mandates that the individual must struggle for it. Miriam’s exegesis replicates (and I would say goes beyond) what Asma Barlas’s argument about the nature of Allah and His inability to do any *Zulm* (oppression) to anyone. In her commentary, Miriam pushes the notion further since she says that, not only is it a responsibility (*haq*) not to oppress, but, that it is each

individual person's responsibility not to allow himself or herself to get into situations, where he or she is likely to be oppressed. It is a human responsibility that people should extricate themselves from oppression. Allah, according to Miriam likes neither the oppressor nor the oppressed.

This reading of this *ayat* is quite radical. I think this commentary can be construed as an Islamic feminist reading of the Qur'an, since Miriam argues that it is an individual's (men's and woman's) responsibility (*haq*) to become liberated, to get out from under any form of oppression. Miriam echoes Barazangi's thesis in reference to the responsibility humans (men and woman) owe God as his *khalifah*. Even though Miriam takes great care to stress Allah and the next world, she is not neglecting this world. Miriam could have implied that in the next life, individuals (including woman) will not be oppressed, thus they (men and woman) need to wait patiently in this world, to attain justice.

However, she appears to indicate that one must be willing to change the oppression in this world now. Obviously, in her reading Miriam does not specify the practical tools that someone being oppressed might use. Instead Miriam couches her analysis in otherworldly terms. Moreover, I find it critical that this reading does not specially focus only on females, specifically, but is geared towards humans in general. In light of Muslim criticisms of the whole notion of human rights as un-Islamic and Western, along with the arguments- that it is only God's will that is important, it is deeply enlightening that Miriam chose to couch escaping from oppression as a right and a obligation that humans, whether male or female, owe to God. Thus justice, and rights, is owed to God. Hence Miriam ties together the intertwined human obligations to God and their responsibility to each, other.

Miriam is a woman who has personally given large gifts of money to close and distant relations. Thus monetary giving is very important to her, and so in many respect I was not surprised that she would be drawn to this one ayat to comment on. Religiosity is deeply embedded in Miriam's life and her religiosity is reflected throughout all her interactions. Miriam's reading of this *ayat* displays great sophistication, nuance, complexity, and pragmatism. She returns to the theme of oppression at the end of the commentary when she explains that in the afterlife that no one will be oppressed or will be able to oppress. Miriam's weltanschauung corresponds to Islam, including her conception of paradise as a place of supreme justice.

Moreover by taking an *ayat* concerned with usury and expanding it's meaning to apply to oppression and the oppressed, Miriam is not only reading the *ayat* in an Islamic feminist framework, but she appears to be advocating an activist feminist reading similar to Wadud's. Ironically Miriam, would not portray herself as feminist, in fact Western feminists looking in at her life might think that she was oppressed, since she lives for her family; children, grandchildren, husband and God. Miriam cooks and cares for her family and she pray to God, both for herself and for her family. I would argue that Barlas is incorrect to some degree; whilst some women are not reading the Qur'an and are reading oppression into it; others are reading it and most definitely not finding oppression there.

#### Analysis of Binna's Interpretation

#### Surah An-Nisa 4:34

Men shall take full care of women with  
The bounties which God has

more abundantly on the former than on the former than on  
the latter, and with what they may spend  
out of their possessions. And with the right  
eous women are the truly devout ones.  
Who guard the intimacy which God has  
(ordained to be) guarded.  
And as for those women whose ill-will  
You have reason to fear, admonish them  
(first): then leave them alone in bed: then  
beat them; and if thereupon they pay you heed,  
do not seek to harm them.  
Behold God is indeed most high, great!

(Translated by Asad, 1980)

Bina lived in an apartment complex, next to a beautiful park. The home was immaculate but simply decorated. Her youngest daughter was home playing on the rug in front of us. The little girl kept herself occupied during the whole period of my conversation with her mother. We talked of Binna's other children, two boys who were in elementary school, and how that had freed up her time, allowing her to return to her degree. Bina, a very gentle young woman wore the hijab. However, although she may have worn a hijab there is nothing downtrodden or oppressed about her. She actually was one of the most vocal participants in my study. When I asked how her family felt about her going to school in the United States, having male colleagues, she replied that she had not put on the hijab to stay indoors all the time!

I admit that before personally knowing the three women that wore hijab in my study, I had biases against hijab wearing women, buying into the stereotype of a soft spoken, shy, deferential woman, and a woman happy to be relegated to the sidelines. I was totally wrong. All the women who wore the hijab were extremely confident, articulate and acutely aware of their opinions! At the beginning of the study, two of the three women worked. Bina was the only one who was a stay-at-mother, however in the course of the study that changed.



On this particular day, our conversation turned to Surah 4, verse 34. Bina appeared a little confused when I asked how she reconciled herself with this verse. She immediately jumped up, and brought out the Qur'an from its designated high resting place. Bina opened the Qur'an, and flipped through the pages very carefully, until she came to the appropriate *surah* and *ayat*. She began to read, however, unlike Miriam, Bina did not read the Arabic first but proceeded straight to the Bangla translation. She read the Bangla out aloud; she stopped once to ask if I understood the very *jautill* (difficult) Bangla? When Bina came to the line I alluded to in our conversation, her reading became choppy as if she had suddenly lost the ability to read the writing in front of her coherently; then her speech sped up, and she raced to the end of the *ayat*. Bina sat for a second, turned to me and said

This is not to be taken this way.

I asked her how it should be taken. She reread the *ayat*:

I think this is like what we were talking about earlier, how sometimes some things are not understandable now. That was that *jooge* (era). This, I think this means *heh* if it gets like that to hit with a *miswak* (a twig that is used as a toothbrush). But not to *martey* (hit) not *juray martey* (hit strongly)...This is not our culture...we have...that *jooge*, maybe they hit but what use is it...you have to show people the good things, be patient, be slow and get them to understand why what they do is bad. Not *ach thapour dayah* (a slap across the face). ..In our culture, its Hindu culture, putting the woman down, of course you can justify it and say it's in there. The ones, the men that, that are open to this, this sort of behavior they will do it. They will do it if it's in here or not

We were quiet for some time. I asked if she took into consideration the Bangla commentary:

I think about *amar jebon* (my life). How can I apply it to my life, because you have to think that although they said this to these people in that time, but they are also speaking to me. That's what you have to think; this is the way I have to go, and this is the way I should behave...

I do agree with the translations. I agree but like reading, when you go to read something, what I mean, yesterday I read about the hijab in surah Mumin, and I came to the topic of marriage...It was saying *beia korthey paro* ( you can marry) *badi* (servants). They can marry them, or even their own wife's *badi*... saying you can go to someone else. It seemed to me ...*Gorma- keman jane laksee* (I don't know how I felt). The translation implied I should look at other surahs but I didn't... I just went to bed...I try not to bother myself with the little things. If I don't understand, I'll try, but sometimes...it's the big things that are important... You have to take things easy, make things easy for people. It's not good to make Islam or anything too hard...If I tried to apply it to this life how does that seem? We don't have *badi's* anymore, *eta kemon hobe* (how can it be). How can this be, in this life, in this *jooge*?

Binna's commentary is interesting in its lack of commentary. As I engaged the women in conversation, I did find that many of them were not eager to examine or "go to those places" that made them challenge Islam or the Qur'an. It was clear that there was a sense that to question the Qur'an, to question God's Words could somehow be a tantamount to a lack of faith. Bina's commentary brings into a much clearer focus the extreme messiness of ideology, doctrine and the lived life for Muslims and especially Muslim women. Elsewhere, Bina was quite adamant that the Qur'an was a guide, telling humans how to live life, leading them onto "the straight path". However, it is evident that sometimes the path is not so straight or clear.

How must we take Bina's commentary of 4:34? Multiple interpretations exist in regards to her confusion and hesitation: either Bina has not read this portion of the Qur'an or has read it but without understanding or appreciating its meaning or maybe

she rejects it. Another explanation could be that Bina had read and understood these lines, but her circumstances were very different then or are very different still. Bina could have read this surah before her marriage, before she could grasp and fully appreciate the consequences inherent in the right to hit, that God appeared to be granting her husband. Another perspective is that Bina read it, understood it, but it had and has no immediate bearing on her life since her husband is not a violent man and thus violence is not an issue in their marriage or in her reality.

In another discussion, Bina explained that even though her parents had hired a *huzoor* (a member of the Ulema class) to come teach the Qur'an to her, she had read it without comprehension. Moreover, Bina declared that although she had finished the Qur'an numerous times, she had done so without fully understanding it. A sense of frustration gripped her, Bina felt that she had wasted her life reading, just uttering the *arabi* words but not fully taking them into her heart. It was only when she came to the United States that Bina began to read a couple of lines of the Qur'an; studying the Qur'an and trying to understand what the words meant, truly meant. I do not mean to imply that Bina only confronted the notion of reading the Qur'an, with meaning, and understanding in the United States, but rather that her environment and the opportunity to actually read it in such a fashion presented itself to her, in the United States.

According to Bina, her father had always urged his children to read only one or two lines, daily, a process through which they would really perceive the Qur'an. It was only when she began attending the Mosque, in the United States, that she actually began to fulfill the wishes of her father. Reading with meaning, exactly what does this mean in relation to this *ayat*? Bina did read, and she obviously understood the meaning of the words "then beat them". But this *ayat* does not stand out all on its own; rather it is

ted to the *ayat* previous to it and the *ayat* preceding it. As we saw in Miriam's exegesis, Miriam was able to tie in the concept of charity and giving, into an *ayat* concerned with usury. Perhaps a result of reading the Qur'an as a linear text, rather than an oral revelation, it appeared that Miriam was to be able to weave together overriding themes of the whole Qur'an instead of commentating on the Qur'an in an atomistic manner. I found that younger women tended to read the Qur'an in a more atomistic manner, which is highly ironic as this is what Islamic feminist scholars have critiqued past male exegetes for.

Additionally, whereas Miriam informed me that she wished to explain an *ayat* to me, I dictated which *ayat* Bina should comment on. There are questions of power, agency and empowerment inherent in these decisions and interactions. Both Polly and Miriam displayed exegetical confidence, articulating that they had the means or the power within themselves to comment freely on the Qur'an. Neither Polly nor Miriam ever asked me "is this the correct or right answer?" To any of my questions regarding the Qur'an. They both decided what *surahs* they wanted to comment on and when to comment on it. Miriam definitely was empowered via her exegesis of the Qur'an. She challenged existing power relations (oppressed/ oppressor) and did so by using the Qur'an itself. Miriam's exegetical dexterity allowed her to gain control over the source of that power. Additionally, the women did not wait for me but rather took charge of the situation vis-à-vis the interpretation.

Approximately eighty percent of the women under forty asked if the answer they gave was correct, even after I told them that there was no right or wrong answer. On the other hand, not only did I tell Bina what to read, thus not only did she advocate the power of reading choice over to me but additionally gave that power to her mosque as well. The mosque reading group decided on a reading, and although Bina may have

been a voice in those decisions, by following which two lines to read, she is allowing others to dictate to her.

To return to Bina's commentary, she acknowledges that all things that were understandable at one time in the Qur'an may not be understandable now. Initially allowing the notion of historicity to be tied to the Qur'an, Bina however quickly retreats, by attempting to explain, that perhaps the beating, should actually be undertaken lightly with a twig. It clearly appears that Bina is deeply conflicted as to how to reconcile her own personal code of nonviolence, with the words in front of her. It is fascinating that Bina declares that "people need to be patient, be slow and get them to understand what they do is bad" But she herself does not slow down and ask what it is that the wives did that would make the Qur'an advocate violence. It may be that the violence is symbolic, but violence nonetheless. It is illuminating that Bina attempts to directly link why men beat women with the culture of Bangladesh, which obviously shares a great similarity with South Asian Hindu culture. Finally, Bina's commentary reflects the disorderliness of life upon ideology by acknowledging that violence happens and that men can justify anything by claiming that it is in the Qur'an.

It is Bina's last comment, that men can justify anything by claiming that it is in the Qur'an that ultimately demonstrates, that maybe Bina's reading can be viewed feminist. Feminist, in terms of the awareness of the power and manipulation that can occur on the part of males' vis-à-vis the Qur'an and its teachings. Bina's reading can be construed as an Islamic feminist reading because it demonstrates the "awareness of the constraints placed on women because of gender, and a rejection of such limitations.

I want to explore the second segment of the conversation with Bina. Declaring that she tries to apply the Qur'an's teaching and message to her personal life, Bina is aware that the Qur'an's original audience was a different people but she imagines that the

Qur'an is speaking specially to her. Many of the women articulated this idea. They understood that the circumstances may have changed, but searched for the "intrinsic" value and meaning that they knew was embedded in a verse, which many felt was the universally applicable element in the *surahs*. In Bina's situation, the problem then occurs when the Qur'an declares or advocates something for her life that she cannot accept or tolerate, and must find a way to transcend the verse.

The question of a husband hitting his wife may not have much meaning if the husband is not inclined to violence. The passage thus is merely academic and therefore it is not necessary to engage with it. However, a passage that advocates that a husband is allowed extra female companionship, where that husband can even wed his wife's servant to get that sexual companionship presents multiple difficulties. In this era, this is inexplicable and thus cannot be rationalized, since society and culture have a different set of parameters with respect to sexual relations. Bina attempts to understand this predicament. She obviously has tried to apply the Qur'anic injunction to her own situation, even if it is hypothetical, but she did not like how it felt. We can see that it bothers her quite a bit since she moves on to other things quickly, but returns again to ask what is for her a rhetorical question,

*Eta kemon hobe* (how can it be). How can this be, in this life,  
in this *jooge*?

In Bina's commentary and questions we can see the playing out of the highly complex social-religious environments defined by continual and dynamic interaction between the praxes of conformity and contention (Abu- Lughod, 1989).

### Analysis of Farah's Interpretation

Farah, a Bangladeshi American woman, gave a totally different reading of 4: 34:

Yeah, I know that verse. I asked my mom what she thought of it. I thought she would give me a good explanation, you know help me clear it all up in my head. You know what she told me? Ignore it! It doesn't mean anything, does your father hit me...What does that mean? Should I ignore it, hide my head in the sand? How can she say to ignore it if she believes in the Qur'an; which she does...? (Laughs)...I think she's scared all this reading, all these questions and I'll come home and say "I'm goanna be a Christian! I don't think that the verse is dealing with some wife saying "no I don't want to go bed with you tonight", its more involved. I read that it's actually dealing with adultery. That God is saying if you think your wife is thinking about putting herself out there then, you can instigate the three step program... (Laughs).

I know that everyone says that God made men more intelligent, more beautiful...can you have beautiful men? ...More stronger, more whatever. But they think it's in here but its not. ..I know it supposed to say it in here but it's the translation and the way the clauses are placed. The verse if translated well says that God gave some, some men more responsibility over women because they are supporting the women economically... I nearly fell off my chair when I read that. ..Yeah so what its saying is that men have responsibility over women because men are supporting the women economically. They are not more superior than women...So you know that verse doesn't have much significance here in the states, women work, they earn, and some men are stay at home dad's ...yeah, your' right probably not that many Bangladeshi men...so men are not more anything over women. Read it again and see if that doesn't make more sense

Farah's interpretation is critical, as it demonstrates some interesting processes.

Firstly Farah is actively questioning the Qur'an and authority figures. She does not view this as disrespect to either her faith or her parents. Farah initially went to the authority figure, in her life her mother. It is interesting that Farah assumed that her mother would have the answer to her question. The young women whom I interviewed who were

under thirty all displayed this trait of asking their mothers for information pertaining to the Qur'an. Farah wants her mother to "clear up" the deep conflict that is evident in her reading of the Qur'an and viewing how her parent's life is lived. Farah's mother's answer actually mirrors Bina's response to some degree; it is not happening in our life, is not our reality and thus has no meaning for us. The divergence between Farah and her mother occurs because Farah actively wishes to engage with the Qur'an. In her commentary it is easy to see the need that she obviously experiences in attempting to reconcile her religion and her lived reality.

Farah is obviously extremely engaged with the Qur'an and she questions even her mother in regards to her lack of engagement. Moreover, Farah is extremely rational in her exegesis, wondering at her mother: "How can she say to ignore it if she believes in the Qur'an which she does". It becomes clear that Farah needs to understand why the Qur'an would articulate a certain point of view. In her commentary, Farah also makes the linkages between the impacts of culture, and historicity on women. She clearly articulates that if one of the components of this equation is changed then the command of this *ayat* is negated. In Farah's commentary, some men work + keep women economically = some men are raised above women. Thus when the socio-cultural- economic situation changes the equation also changes: Some men work+ some women work= women are equal with men. Farah's commentary can most definitely be classified as an Islamic feminist perspective. It is also interesting that rather asking me, what I thought about the ayat or if this was the correct answer, Farah ends the commentary by instructing me to "Read it again and see if that doesn't make more sense".

### Discussion



There is obviously exegesis occurring in the everyday South Asian female community. However, there are divergent paths that the women are taking and many times the same way woman is incorporating multiple approaches to her interpretation. The everyday women have integrated some of the approaches that the classical exegetes utilized, whilst also adopting exegetical methodology that the feminist scholars have championed. There is not a long-term sustained project on the part of everyday women as the feminist scholars have undertaken. The everyday women approach Qur'anic interpretation atomistically just as the male classical exegetes did. Thus, the women have a problem and then they approach the Qur'an, to discover what it may tell them regarding the subject. This may be a direct consequence of the way the everyday women view the Qur'an, as a guide to life, rather than a direct law book or an explicit blueprint for living.

We see in Farah's interpretation the blooming of the hermeneutical methodology that Wadud advocates. Farah looks back to the posterior verses and then forward to situate what the verse under interpretation means. Additionally, Farah applies a formulaic analysis, which Wadud also advocates. Thus, Farah articulates that although wife beating may have been permitted at one time, since the formula that set up the condition has changed, that negate the permission to beat the wife.

Miriam and Bina's interpretation highlight the importance the historical and cultural matrixes play in interpretation. Thus as Bina has a non-violent spouse, the whole notion of wife beating is alien to her and thus she perceives, perhaps rightly the verses has no meaning for her. Additionally, Miriam's interpretation highlights that anti-patriarchal readings can be made from verses which on the surface do seem to address patriarchy or aggression. Thus, classical exegetes were able to view and interject misogynist readings into verses that do not deal with women.

## CHAPTER 8

### Concluding Thoughts

This dissertation has explored whether and in what capacities everyday South Asian transnational Muslim women are engaged in feminist interpretations or exegesis of the Qur'an. Additionally, if everyday women are actively conducting Qur'anic interpretation, this study has sought to chart and express the diverse paths women take in their understanding of the Qur'an. At the start of this research I hypothesized that transnational Muslim females in the West are located in a liminal space, and that this "betwixt and between" position may predispose everyday women to engage, interpret and ultimately be empowered to question existing masculine interpretations of the Qur'an.

Whilst there has been an abundance of literature about women in Islam, the lion's share focuses on the Middle East. However, as I stated in chapter 1, the majority of the Muslim population do not reside in the Middle East but rather in Asia. Additionally, there is a paucity of literature concerned with South Asian Muslim women's engagement with the Qur'an and their spirituality. There has been little attempt to understand how the majority of Muslim women relate to the Qur'an and how in turn the Qur'an informs their lives. The literature exhibits a tendency to both separate religion and the Qur'an away from the individual and also to treat religious sensibilities as fully formed entities. Moreover, scholars are inclined to conclude that religious women must be unknowingly aiding in their own oppression and that of their fellow women (Moghissi 1999).

In this final chapter I will review earlier chapters and discuss the findings of this study. Additionally, I will offer some suggestions for further research. As I articulated in chapter 1, feminism is slippery concept to grasp. Feminism is not homogeneous either cross culturally or even intra-culturally. Essentially, feminism and feminist discourses are products of specific places, times, histories, races and classes. The

definition of feminism that this dissertation broadly applied was formulated by Cooke and Badran (1990). Thus, feminism in this dissertation is defined as one or more of the following: where there is a consciousness by females that as females [and within the matrix of race, sexuality, color, religion, class, and era], they are habitually located in a detrimental position: some mode of rejection of sanctioned behaviors and thought: and endeavors to interpret their own realities and then to enhance their position or lives as women.

In order to determine if the participants in this study were engaged in feminist exegesis, I analyzed their spiritual narratives. In each woman's narrative I looked for the following: an awareness that the Qur'an or its interpretation placed the woman, or women in general in a disadvantaged position: a questioning of past and present Qur'anic exegesis; an awareness that culture may be grafted on to the exegesis of the Qur'an: evidence in the woman or her narrative of some form of rejection of enforced behaviors or thoughts: and an attempt by the narrator to interpret her own experiences and attempt to improve, even subtly, her position as a female. Furthermore, in analyzing the women's spiritual narratives, this research endeavored to capture any movement by the participants in their praxis and understanding of the Qur'an.

The females themselves articulated feelings of liminality, as discussed in chapter 2. Jasmine verbalized an awareness of being alienated in her own body and a sense of confusion regarding what or who she is; American or Bengali or both. Bina pronounced that she was caught in the middle. She was neither of one country nor the other, with one foot in each land. Bina seemed more concerned that her children find some "wholeness" in "their" land. However she did not know if that was possible. Moreover, Sara eloquently spoke of her different consciousness that were "awakened" by her

being in America. For Sara, that “awakening” was bittersweet as she began to question her cherished social, cultural and familial ties.

Marla expressed that, as a young woman growing up she was cognizant that she was living a bifurcated life. When she returned home from school, Britain was not allowed to enter Marla’s Bengali home. Bangladesh existed within the four walls of her home. Farah poignantly talked of the cameras moving in the movie being played in Bangladesh but how for her parents, the film had stopped at one critical frozen frame. Bengali culture for Farah’s parents was embodied in the Bangladesh they had left 25 years ago.

Nonetheless, does this liminality on the part of the females necessarily translate into an open and expanded consciousness that allows for questioning of past Qur’anic exegesis? And does this opened perception allow the females to analyze and see the inferior situation of women, rejection of enforced behaviors and thought, interpreting of their own experiences and improving their position or lives as women? The women’s narratives did display various pathways to feminism, as I will outline below.

Jasmine questioned whether Bengali culture was more important than religion for her parents. What Jasmine seeks here is the disentanglement of culture from her faith. She believed that Muslims in America were more authentic in their religiosity than Muslims in Bangladesh. Jasmine articulated that Bengali American Muslims, as a direct result of living in a non majority Muslim nation, consciously had to think and actively engage with their religion on a daily basis. Therefore, to be a Muslim in America appears to Jasmine to be an active conscious choice. Additionally, in the narrative concerned with swimming, Jasmine articulates the negation of respect that some cultural practices have for women. It is thought-provoking that Jasmine later on takes swimming lessons and vacations in Bermuda. Thus, Jasmine’s narrative and later

praxis demonstrate the opening up of mental vistas in her own consciousness. Jasmine felt empowered through her own effort to break some of the cultural and familial bonds in her life.

Bina elucidated that she now read the Qur'an in order to really understand it, rather than mindlessly mouthing the words. She also performed the *ibadat* (rituals of Islam) mindfully now, something she did not do in Bangladesh. Moreover, Bina stated that in *Amreka* (America), she had found her religion anew. Bina strongly believed that women should wear the hijab. She had studied the particular verse which she said mandates veiling. Nonetheless, Bina articulated that she is open to the possibility that her daughter may not wear it. Bina pragmatically expressed that her daughter was of another culture and thus may interpret this verse differently. What is stirring regarding Bina's narrative is her awareness that her daughter has a choice to take off the hijab. This is a choice that Bina herself did not have in Bangladesh.

Farah clearly states that culture impinges on and impacts how Muslims perceive and read the Qur'an. Moreover, Farah stresses that men have taken the power to interpret, and used that power to subdue women. Sara actively questions why women are seen as inferior to men in her culture and in her religion. At the beginning of my research Sara always followed the rules and entered the mosque by the women's entrance, in the back. However a year later, Sara had begun to use the men's entrance or the front door to the mosque. Walking through a door may not appear significant to a Western feminist. However, to Sara and the other Muslim females, walking through the front entrance of the mosque constituted the ultimate act in feminism. In this one simple act Sara uses all the criteria that Cook and Badran list as acts of feminism. She is conscious that that as a female both she and all the Muslim women of the mosque community are placed in a detrimental position. Moreover, Sara rejects the sanctioned

behavior and the thought behind the notion of females utilizing a different entrance. Sara interpreted having to go through the back door to “God’s house” as men denying her the same privilege before God that the Qur’an tells her she has.

In Sara’s narratives we find a reoccurring theme in many of the other women’s narratives, oppression by loved ones; Sara’s father’s lack of faith in her; Tara’s grandmother’s lack of empathy and trust in Tara’s mother decision; Poppy’s feelings of betrayal by her son; and Jasmine’s perceptions that her parents did not understand her. Therefore for these women the oppression in their lives was often caused by loved ones. This made the oppression for the females even more painful. Essentially, overcoming oppression for many of the females in the study meant overcoming and breaking down cultural and social bonds of families. This terrified many of the females. However, some of the women are able to achieve it.

I highlighted in chapter 2, how Arkoun stated that the historicity of the Qur’an was an unthinkable in Islam. The acceptance that the Qur’an was revealed in a historical and a temporal setting and thus itself has a history is missing from the Muslim consciousness. However, the study displayed the growth that some women underwent in the course of the two years. Jasmine took an Islamic history class on campus. She discovered that the Muslim doctrines that she had been told were set in place by God were actually results of intense, prolonged debates and contention. Farah also sought to quell the questions that arose inside her. She initially began by researching specific topics. However, towards the end of the study, she too was reading alternative literature regarding Islam and actively engaging with the Qur’an and reading the Qur’an on a daily basis.

Some women, both in the United States and the United Kingdom did not want to cross the dogmatic enclosures surrounding historicity. Whilst Poppy did acknowledge

that the Qur'an has a history, she also did not venture beyond that in her narratives. For Poppy, the Qur'an's historicity in no way negated her belief in the Qur'an or how she saw it. Miriam and Rokeya both wanted to learn as much as possible about Muslim history. These women all displayed a thirst for knowledge about the Qur'an. Provocatively, learning that the Qur'an had a specific temporal historicity attached to it appeared to propel these females to further engage with the Qur'an.

Chapter 3 highlighted how the issues of race and class may influence the way women perceive, interact with and interpret the Qur'an. South Asian women met different social and cultural receptions in their host countries. In the United Kingdom, South Asians were relegated to a black, working class and inferior status. South Asian Muslims were not fully integrated into the fabric and psyche of the United Kingdom for many years, whilst South Asians in the United States were looked upon as professional, middle class, and integrated.

An interesting difference emerged in some of the study subjects. Younger second generation Muslim women in Britain, had a more romanticized view of "Islamic countries" or their "home countries". These women were of the opinion that it would be easier to be Muslim in an Islamic country where they could hear the call to prayer, see women in traditional Islamic clothes, feel and actually join in the Muslim celebrations of the country. We can see a reflection of this in Rokeya's narrative. Rokeya perceives that it is easier to practice Islam in a Muslim majority country. However, her narrative displays a yearning for belonging, and an idealized romantic vision of a Muslim country. Some British females (8 out of 10) perceived Islam and Muslims to be distinct entities and identities from others in Britain.

Interestingly, older British Bengali women did not convey this longing, which surprised me. Miriam and Poppy, although acknowledging an ache for Bangladesh, did



not hold idealized images of Muslim countries. Both women agreed that whilst it may appear easier to practice Islam in a Muslim country, the reality was different. Moreover, Miriam and Poppy said that residing in a non-majority Muslim country made them rely on and appreciate their faith more.

The Bengali American women did not express any desire for an idealized place to practice Islam. In fact, they articulated that whilst they did long for Bangladesh, that longing was more a desire for the family and friends they had left behind. Bina stated, "You could be a good Muslim anywhere". That oftentimes it is the hardships that actually tests and solidifies one's faith. This is similar to Jasmine's analysis earlier regarding Bengali Muslims. Bina was cognizant that it may appear easier to be a practicing Muslim in a Muslim majority country. Nevertheless, by observing Muslims from Muslim majority countries at the mosque, Bina felt qualified to state that they were not really following their religion faithfully either. Moreover, Bina articulated that the economic opportunities were better in the United States for both herself and her children. The difference in the two narratives suggests that the romanticization of Muslim countries by first generation Muslim women in Britain may stem from not having experienced "real" life in Bangladesh.

The young Bengali American women displayed no yearning for Bangladesh at all. At some point all the young Bengali American females, expressed that they were American, some qualified the term later as Bengali American. However, whilst all the Bengali American women stated that their children would be Muslim, older women stressed that their children would have a mixture of both American and Bengali culture in them. Younger females like Tara, articulated that their children would be American Muslims and have an American culture.

Essentially, chapter 3 asked if people from a shared cultural background, in this instance South Asia, would share the same interpretations of the Qur'an. The narratives of Bina and Rokeya suggest that other salient factors such as race, class and acceptance are profoundly influential in how religion and exegesis is thought through.

In chapter 4, we see that orthodoxy via dogmatic enclosure has formulated an "accepted" set of Muslim doctrines vis-a vis the Qur'an. However, the spiritual narratives of the females in the study deviated, sometimes significantly, from some of those established doctrines. This is significant, since it indicates the active expansion of the dogmatic enclosure surrounding the Qur'an. Furthermore, this departure from orthodox doctrines demonstrates a rejection of enforced thoughts concerning the Qur'an by these South Asian Muslim women.

I want to quickly recap the ways the women agreed with and diverged from orthodoxy's established doctrines. Muslim orthodoxy and dogmatic enclosure have determined that the Qur'an is the Word of God; is uncreated, eternal, and perfect; it is Muhammad's miracle; the Arabic language is a *lingua sacra*; and the only path to salvation is through Islam (doctrine of supersession).

All the females in the study agreed with orthodoxy's view that the Qur'an was the word of God. However, the narratives displayed great dynamism in the way the females regarded this Word. The Qur'an served as a guide, a map, and a comfort and problem solver to the females. The women's narratives indicated that they used the Qur'an to put their lives and troubles into perspective. Moreover, the Qur'an was utilized by the females to find meaning in their own specific situations. However, not one of the woman articulated that the Qur'an informed her morals or that it was a specific and perfect blueprint for living now.

The women in the study diverged strongly from orthodoxy's concept of the uncreated Qur'an. All the females believed in the createdness of the Qur'an. God, they articulated was uncreated and thus had no beginning and no end. But the Qur'an was God's words, which did not or could not exist before or simultaneous to Him. Moreover, the females regarded the creation of the *surahs* (verses) and the Qur'an as responses to specific situations that were located in a specific time. Essentially, the females saw the Qur'an as being created to address explicit problems in a set community (7th century Arabia) and to a certain people, grappling with specific problem (Mecca and Medina). Many of the older women's narratives did not voice the historicity and temporality attached to the Qur'an. However, the younger females, especially Farah, Tara and Jasmine displayed an awareness of the temporal and historical nature of the Qur'an.

Much of the women's reasoning mirrored a rationalist tendency that had informed the exegesis of the South Asian scholars Sayyid Ahmed Khan and Muhammad Iqbal. Furthermore, the women's presumption regarding the createdness of the Qur'an in many respects mirrors the arguments forwarded hundreds of years ago by the Mu'tazilites. The Mu'tazilites was the rationalist school of Islam, whose ideas orthodoxy via dogmatic enclosure declared heretical. The females are obviously opening up and expanding dogmatic enclosure to engulf formerly heretical ideas.

One more doctrine where the women departed from orthodoxy concerned the eternalness of the Qur'an. None of the females considered the Qur'an to be eternal, not in the same manner as orthodoxy perceived it. According to the women, the Qur'an did not exist before God and was not co-existent or co-eternal with God. They indicated that since the Qur'an was a created entity it logically cannot exist infinitely with God. Even when some women articulated that the Qur'an was eternal, they clearly understand it in

a different way from orthodoxy. When Miriam expressed that the Qur'an is eternal, she refers to its perceived eternal existence from the moment of its creation and in the promise that God makes that it will be eternally protected from destruction and incorruptibility.

Only the older females alluded to the doctrine of the miracle of the Qur'an. Younger women never articulated or talked about the Qur'an as Muhammad's miracle. We saw in chapter 4 that much of the miraculous nature of the Qur'an is tied to its linguistic structure. Thus, whilst native Arabic speakers may grasp this miracle, for the non-native speakers this point may be lost. Moreover, rationalist tendencies were again displayed when the topic of Muhammad's illiteracy arose. Some younger women wandered at it or plainly rejected it. Both Nyla and Tara stated that it was not logical that a rich merchant would not at least know how to read. Thus, Tara and Nyla are reflecting their cultural biases in rejecting Muhammad's illiteracy. In the United States successful businessmen and women have gone to college, and know how to read and write.

Moreover, some of the females concluded that as God gave Muhammad the power to read in the cave at the beginning of the revelation, therefore he could not be illiterate when the Qur'an was being revealed. Hence, in interpreting Qur'anic doctrines, South Asian Muslim of the diaspora displayed strong rationalist tendencies and a willingness to push back at dogmatic enclosures and enforced thoughts.

The creation of Bangladesh clearly demonstrates the cultural importance and significance that the Bangla language has for Bangladeshis. The saliency that their mother tongue holds for Bengalis is manifested in their negation of Arabic as *lingua*

*sacra*. None of the women perceived Arabic as a sacred or an innately special language. It was more important to the females that they understood the meaning of the Qur'an, in whatever language made most sense to them. We see that Bina rejects learning to speak non Qur'anic Arabic. Bina articulates that she only needs to read classical Arabic, to understand the Qur'an and that she does not want to become an Arab! Even those women like Miriam who advocated reading the Qur'an in Arabic, expressed that they only did so out of their love for Muhammad. Hence in older females' narratives, such as Miriam's and Poppy's, we can see strains of the Sufi influence over Bengali culture. Both women's narratives and exegesis displayed elements of the Sufi inspired reverence and love for Muhammad.

However, although many older women denied the specialness of Arabic, they still recited blessings in Arabic and made an effort to call the prophets by their Arabic names. Additionally, all the females acknowledged that one should read ritualized prayers in Arabic. Hence, this appeared a boundary that they were not willing to cross. Moreover, some of the women displayed facsimiles of the *surahs* (verses in the Qur'an) in Arabic on their walls and on their necklaces. This suggests an ambiguity that still needs to be worked out, in relation to the question of Arabic as *Linga sacra* for South Asian females. Additionally, it demonstrates that cultural acclimation is quite entrenched in many of the older women. Although, as Farah pointed out, even if you wanted to get jewelry with Bengali Qur'anic inscription or wall copies of the *surahs* (verses) in Bengali, it's next to impossible to do so.

The women's narrative of Muhammad's biography indicates that South Asian women relate to different elements of his life story. So we see Tara's focus on the abandoned Hajar and her child; Miriam's highlights Muhammad's romantic relationship with Khadija, his first wife and her devotion to him; and Farzana

accentuates the *Hijra* (the migration) element of Muhammad's story. These aspects of the narrative again do not totally conform to orthodox historiography regarding Muhammad's life. Therefore, South Asian Muslim females of the diaspora interpret Muhammad's biography in ways that are meaningful for them, based upon their own life experiences and values.

When South Asian women of the diaspora are presented with contrasting facts pertaining to the Qur'an, many of them choose those that resonated with their own life narrative. Thus, in Miriam's case, her life experience of having children and going through menopause allowed her to explore or entertain the possibility that Khadija may not have been 40 years old, as orthodoxy states, when she married Muhammad. This awareness and willingness on Miriam's part to entertain new thoughts and to cross dogmatic enclosures is critical. The significance stems from the ability to question and the willingness to break a part of the official biographical narrative of Muhammad's life, which is a foundational narrative (mythology) of Muslim life.

The doctrine of *supercessionism* showed interesting variation among the females. The majority of the women in the United Kingdom (8 out of 10) agreed that the only way to find salvation was thru Islam. Poppy expressed uneasiness that such a loving God would condemn so many people just for not believing in the Qur'an. She articulated that there were many ways to reach God and the "people of the book" (traditionally, Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians) had legitimate books. In her narrative Poppy again mirrors some of the Sufi teachings that permeate Bengali culture. In the United States, some women (4) agreed with the doctrine, whilst the others did not. There was no direct correlation with age. Bina and Sara surprised me by agreeing with the doctrine, whilst other women such as Jasmine and Farzana totally disagreed with it.

Again we see a rejection by the everyday females of enforced thoughts and the process of retrieving the thinkable from the unthinkable in Islam.

Chapter 5 demonstrates that classical exegetes and exegesis were highly influenced by the cultural norms of their epoch, just like the modern scholars. Thus essentially exegetes could not help but be influenced by the cultural milieu within which they lived and their own sensibilities of natural and unnatural and right and wrong. Much of the misogynistic ideas that were formed by the Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Assyrians, and Sassanid empires eventually became incorporated into the Umayyad and Abbasid Muslim empires. As all the classical texts, that many Muslims believe to be error proof, were written during the reign of the Umayyad and Abbasid empires, much of misogyny was incorporated into the classical Qur'anic exegesis.

In addition, chapter 5 opened up dogmatic enclosure and demonstrates the great exegetical diversity that existed and still exists with Qur'anic exegesis. The mechanism of dogmatic enclosure works similarly for both Islamic orthodoxy and scholars of Islam. Both groups show a penchant to narrow and tether Islam to the Middle East. Chapter 5 introduced what Arkoun (2002) calls some of the "voices [which] are silenced, creative talents [that were] neglected, marginalized in Qur'anic exegesis. Thus Shah Wali Allah, Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Muhammad Iqbal, who are three of the most famous and influential South Asian exegetes, were surveyed in this chapter. In order to demonstrate that there is a precedent for challenging orthodox exegesis, chapter 5 also surveys other marginalized Qur'anic exegetes of the twentieth century. Thus chapter 5 displays the importance of recognizing the ways that classical exegetes' fundamental presuppositions diverge from modern scholars.

Chapter 6 explores the concept of Islamic feminism and how feminism needs to incorporate and make room for women's religiosity. What is significant regarding this

chapter is that although the females articulated a feminist subjectivity, they did so in terms of the interpretation of the Qur'an and not in terms of the Qur'an itself. They essentially did not find the Qur'an to be patriarchal and misogynist but rather its interpretation. None of the female considered that the Qur'an itself placed women in a disadvantaged position. In this manner they mirrored the 3 feminist scholars that this chapter highlighted: Asma Barlas, Nimat Barazangi and Amina Wadud.

The Muslim females' narratives in this chapter overwhelmingly proclaim how important their religiosity was for them. Bina forcefully stated that she did not want to separate her religion from herself. Moreover, in the younger women's narrative we also see a religiosity that is often surprising. Jasmine makes herself go to the Mosque, even though it is not inviting for her. It is a chance for Jasmine to reconnect with her religion. There were no easy formulaic answers in this section. This chapter sought to chart the movement of the formation of feminist subjectivities. Thus, we see the gradual genesis of a feminist subjectivity in Nyla. Nyla started the study by articulating that she did not know what a feminist is, to stating that men have taken the power in Islam and those individuals social and culture environment blinds them to this fact. Nyla does not ever state that she is a feminist; however, she does ask "what is wrong with being one?" Nyla also perceptively articulates that it Bengali culture, which views feminist females negatively.

In Farah's narratives we see a rejection of the Bengali homemaker model, as well as the enforced thoughts and behaviors generated by Bengali gender roles. In rejecting the gender roles she sees represented by her parents, Farah articulates a desire for a different model for her own future marriage. In all the young women's narratives, we can see an advocacy of a more equitable domestic work distribution.



Chapter 7 explores the everyday women's own exegesis of Qur'anic *surahs* (verses). What is important in these narratives is the context that the exegesis occurs in. Thus, taken on its own, Miriam's interpretation of a section of Surah Baqara does not appear at all feminist. However once we realize that earlier in the week, Miriam and I had been discussing a case of spousal abuse that had occurred in the community, the interpretation takes on a fresh meaning.

Bina's attempts at interpretation of the "beating" verse again do not appear to be feminist. However once we understand that for Bina, the notion that a husband can beat his wife is not within her reality as her own husband is not prone to violence; the interpretation can take on a new visage. Bina's commentary acknowledges that violence happens and that men can justify anything by claiming that it is in the Qur'an. This is an important statement as it demonstrates Bina's cognizance, that men have the power to decide and enforce anything, within her culture. Bina's reading can be construed as an Islamic feminist reading since it demonstrates the "awareness of the constraints placed on women because of gender, and a rejection of such limitations. Additionally orthodoxy states that the Qur'an is meant for all people and all times. Thus it implies that Muslims should apply all the guidelines found within the Qur'an. However, Bina rejects this enforced thought. She asks "If I tried to apply it to this life how does that seem?"

The context of Farah's interpretation displays an element that arose frequently between older women and their children; questioning of authority figures. Bina openly stated, "In this country, they [children] are taught to question everything you say. But *deshi* (our home/ Bangladesh) we teach them to obey". Farah and other young females viewed questioning as a positive thing whilst their parents sometimes viewed it

adversely. When Farah questions the Qur'an, She does not perceive this as a sign of disrespect to her faith or her parents.

We can see that older women were more engaged, more willing and more confident in performing Qur'anic exegesis. They displayed quite complex and nuanced commentaries and were adept at using different strands of material to elucidate their meaning. Additionally, these women were also more inclined to declare that they did not require the service of a *mulabe*. The mature females elucidated that they could clearly understand the Qur'an. Moreover, if older women sensed they were lacking in some essential knowledge, for example, biographical details of Muhammad, they were quick to admit it and quick to ask for recommendations. All the females both young and old displayed a great desire for further knowledge of their faith. However, only the mature females asked for information on materials to further aid them in learning about their religion. Older females moreover, felt empowered to interpret. They critiqued and elucidated the Qur'an by coupling local and global worlds in an active, rationalized manner, while utilizing multiple, and even disparate repositories of cultural meaning.

Younger women, generally displayed low levels of confidence and exhibited the conflict between Islamic ideology and lived reality. These women were the first to ask if there was a correct answer to the questions posed. The commentaries of women in the twenty-five to forty age groups' displayed the contested dynamics between Islamic ideology, the woman's own image and her praxis. Females in this group were juggling multiple realities, and were actively concerned with resisting multiple power schemes in practices, even though Western feminists see them as struggling only with anti-Muslim/ patriarchal forces.

The questions that this dissertation has sought to answer, 1) are everyday Muslim women of the South Asian diaspora engaged in interpretation of the Qur'an

and 2) are the interpretations feminist, can both be answered positively. The feminist scholars surveyed in this dissertation are writing in an academic setting, where cogent, focused framework and articulation is expected. Thus, I argue that within the non-academic setting that these everyday women inhabit, their interpretations of the Qur'an, demonstrates an even more engaged and feminist praxis. The everyday females' narratives demonstrated that they were cognizant that women were placed in an inferior position; they rejected some enforced thoughts and behaviors and many attempted to better their own lives. Moreover, all the women, both young and old, displayed a dynamic growth during the course of my research. This as Cook and Badran (1990) state is feminism, regardless of whether or not the women in question identify themselves as feminists or affiliate themselves with groups of women who assume this identity.

#### Future Research

This research is not comprehensive in its range. For the sake of uniformity in this multi-sited study, I restricted the participants to one socio economic class. It would be interesting to undertake a larger single site study that incorporated multiple socio-economic classes. Additionally another approach that is intriguing is to attempt the opposite of this study. Thus a future investigation could narrow the research population severely and follow the life and spiritual narratives of just mature females to pinpoint the instances of liminality in their lives and the repercussions on their exegesis. Additionally, I was always hampered by not freely giving more information to the women on the historicity of the Qur'an and the debates that produced the set Islamic doctrines. It would be interesting to research what females thought of the Qur'an, with more 'historical' information.

Glossary

*Ahadith*: the narratives of the Prophets Muhammad's life and praxis.

*Amin*: English equivalent of "Amen."

*Aql*: intelligence.

*Awrah*: forbidden.

*Ayat*: sign; verse of the Qur'an.

*Azbab al-nuzul*: occasions of revelations of Qur'anic verses.

*Asr*: afternoon.

*Basmalah*: name of an Arabic phrase: "in the Name of Allah, the Most Merciful, the Most Beneficent."

*Detain*: doctrine of the Qur'an's eternalness.

*Din*: religion.

*Eid ul Azha*: one of the major Muslim festivals, observed during *hajj*.

*Eid ul Fitr*: one of the major Muslim festivals, observed at the end of *Rammadan*.

*Fatihah*: The opening. The first surah in the Qur'an. Analogous to the Lord's Prayer in Christianity. *Fatihah* is recited at every prayer.

*Hadith*: (pl *Ahadith*) the narratives of the Prophets Muhammad's life and praxis.

*Hajj*: pilgrimage to Mecca.

*Halal*: permissible.

*Halaqas*: prayer meetings.

*Hijab*: veil, covering

*Ibadat*: formal ritualized acts of worship

*Ijaz*: doctrine of the Qur'an's inimitability.

*Ijtihad*: critical reasoning.

*Kabba*: House of God in Makah (Mecca) built by Adam and then rebuilt by Abraham and Ishmael.

*Kalam Allah*: Word of God.

*Khalifah*: representative of God, vice-regent.

*Khutba*: sermon preceding the Friday congregational prayer.

*Iqra*: read or recite.

*Jibreel*: Gabriel.

*Madrassa*: traditional Islamic religious school.

*Masjid*: Mosque.

*Mazara*: Sufi shrine.

*Mihnah*: trial or inquisition.

*Mushaf*: a codex, a collection of sheets brought into fixed order.

*Nab*: Prophet.

*Nafs*: self, person, soul.

*Namaz*: set prayer.

*Namaz-ruza*: prayer-fasting.

*Prem*: romantic love.

*Ramadan*: the month of fasting for all Muslims.

*Ruza*: fasting.

*Rusul*: prophet and messenger.

*Shahabi*: companion of the Prophet Muhammad.

*Shalwar kameez*: a two-piece dress, consisting of loose, pleated pants and a tunic worn with a light shawl draped loosely over the chest.

*Surah*: a “chapter” in the Qur’an.

*Swab*: blessings.

*Tabizz*: amulets.

*Tafsir*: Qur’anic exegesis. Explanation of Qur’anic verses.

*Tawhid*: doctrine of God’s Unity.

*Ummah*: global Muslim community.

*Zakat*: almsgiving, charity.

*Zulum*: doing harm to others by transgressing their rights.

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