Chapter 3
Young Muslim Women and the Islamic Family: Reflections on Conflicting Ideals in British Bangladeshi Life

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Abstract In this chapter we will be examining attitudes to marriage among young British Bangladeshi women. We see the move to new forms of Muslim piety among these women as related in part to the problems posed by marriage in the contemporary British environment. New Islamic groups provide both social and intellectual resources that may help to resolve difficulties and issues in relation to marriage and the family, including tension between Western models of romantic love and marriage and the desire to behave in a proper Islamic way. At the same time, the specific forms of Islamic practice adopted may also be constitutive of a new sense of self and a new identity which carries along with it a new and different sense of what the marital relationship, the woman's relationship to her own body and self and her relationship to her present or future children might be.

Introduction

In this chapter, we will be examining attitudes to marriage among young British Bangladeshi women. We see the move to new forms of Muslim piety among these women as related in part to the problems posed by marriage in the contemporary British environment. New Islamic groups provide both social and intellectual resources that may help to resolve difficulties and issues in relation to marriage and the family, including tension between Western models of romantic love and marriage and the desire to behave in a proper Islamic way. The chapter is based on preliminary

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findings from our Economic and Social Research Council[1] (ESRC) funded research project on young Bangladeshis, marriage and the family in Bangladesh and the United Kingdom (UK). After introducing the project as a whole, and discussing the general theoretical perspective from which we are approaching it, we present some of our initial field material from the UK. The material presented refers to two Islamic organisations (the Islamic Circles and the Hijaz Community) and a number of isolated individuals in the UK. We also discuss a related case-study from Rozario's previous research in Bangladesh.

New Islamic groups provide both social and intellectual resources that may help to resolve difficulties and issues in relation to marriage and the family. These issues may include:

1. The conflict between the extended family's pressure for conformity and a traditional female role, and the desire of young women, often involved in professional career or other paid employment, for a more individualised life-pattern;
2. The conflict between the parents' or extended family's pressure to marry a partner chosen for family reasons, and the women's desire to marry a partner of her own choice; and,
3. The tension between Western models of romantic love and marriage and the desire to behave in a proper Islamic way.

At the same time, the specific forms of Islamic practice adopted may also be constitutive of a new sense of self and a new identity which carries along with it a new and different sense of what the marital relationship, the woman's relationship to her own body and self and her relationship to her present or future children might be.

The Islam and Young Bangladeshis Project

The Islam and Young Bangladeshis project, which commenced in January 2008, is funded by a 3-year grant from the ESRC. This is an anthropological study of transformations in marriage and the family among young Bangladeshis in Bangladesh and the UK. A central issue concerns the influence of modernist forms of Islam (including the so-called 'Islamist' or 'fundamentalist' movements) on marriage and the family. We suggested in our research proposal that much of the appeal of these modernist versions of Islam lies in their ability to offer solutions to the problems faced by contemporary Muslim families in a rapidly changing social and economic environment (Shaheed 1994; Metcalf 1998). Young Muslims today, we suggested, are constructing and negotiating their personal identities and their sense of self in a radically new context, shaped by these new Islamic conceptions of marriage and the family as well as by secular, Westernised images of the nuclear family and romantic love.

The intention of the project was to study young Bangladeshis in three main locations, namely, rural Bangladesh (villages in Dhaka district where Rozario has carried out research over many years), urban Bangladesh (Dhaka city), and the UK. While we have carried out research in all three locations, this paper derives primarily from our UK sample.

The project developed out of a number of previous projects in which we had been involved, but particularly out of some preliminary research which Rozario (2006) undertook with university students and middle-class women in Bangladesh in 2004, and a more extended project on British Bangladeshi families with genetic illness with which she was involved in 2005–2007 (Rozario and Gilliat-Ray 2007; Rozario 2007). The field research was carried out primarily by Rozario, with a part-time male research assistant assisting with the interviews in Bangladesh, particularly those with Bangladeshi men. Samuel undertook a smaller number of interviews, both in Bangladesh and in the UK, and assisted with the analytical side of the project. This paper derives from the first phase of research on the UK part of the project, from January to July, 2008.

In contrast with Rozario's previous project with UK Bangladeshis on families with genetic illness (Rozario and Gilliat-Ray 2007; Rozario 2007), it proved very easy to recruit participants for the project under consideration. There are evidently many young Bangladeshis interested in talking about love, marriage and human relationships. What was something of a surprise, however, was the range of religious groups we encountered in the course of the research. Our references to 'modernist Islamic movements' and 'new forms of Islam', in the Grant proposal, had been intentionally vague. Our hope was to find a sample of young people representing a variety of different groups and approaches, particularly those for whom new varieties of Islam had come to play a significant role. Our expectation, though, was that the field would be dominated, both in Bangladesh and the UK, by the three best-known and (in the first two cases at least) well-studied movements. These are:

- the Tabligh-i Jama'at, a conservative pietist movement founded in North India in the 1920s by Muhammad Ilyas (1885–1944) and now has a very large following in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, and substantial organisations in South Africa and a number of other countries (Metcalf 1998; Mayaram 1997; Masud 2000; Reetz 2004, 2006; Sikand 2002, 2006);
- the Jama'at-i-Islami, a more politically-oriented but also socially conservative movement founded in Lahore in the 1940s by Sayyid Abul Ala Maududi (1903–1979) and represented by religiously-oriented political parties in Bangladesh, Pakistan, India and Kashmir (Nasr 1994; Ahmad 2005; Riaz 2004; Shehabuddin 1999, 2008), and by a variety of UK organisations; and,
- the Hizb-ut Tahrir, another world-wide organisation oriented towards a more radical vision of the Islamic state as revival of the Caliphate (Commins 1991; Horton 2006), currently illegal in Bangladesh.

In fact, on our initial research in Dhaka, while we encountered a grassroots Islamic revival organisation of the Tabligh-i Jama'at variety, we also met young people belonging to two quite different Sufi-oriented groups, and came across a

modernist Islamic institute staffed mainly by young British-educated doctors and lawyers. A number of members of our UK sample are affiliated to a third Sufi-oriented group, the Hijaz College at Nuneaton (cf. Asif 2006).[2]

All this suggested that the Tabligh-i Jama'at, Jama'at-i-Islami and Hizb-ut Tahrir by no means monopolise the scene, either in Bangladesh or in the UK, and that young Muslims are attracted to a variety of other Islamic options beyond these socially conservative groups. Moreover, many of the young Bangladeshi Muslims we have met, while undoubtedly serious about their Islamic commitment, are not linked to any specific religious organisation.

Theoretical Approaches

Before turning to examine some of the field material, we note that there has been a very substantial literature by now on women's involvement with new Islamic movements, particularly when these have led to the adoption of practices which are generally seen in Western society as being detrimental to women.

The work of the Pakistani-American anthropologist, Saba Mahmood, presents a sophisticated discussion of some of these issues in the context of Muslim women in Egypt (Mahmood 2001a, b, 2005; see also Bautista 2008). One of the more significant aspects of Mahmood's position is seen in the sense that women's embodied agency has a directional character; in Foucauldian terms, it might be referred to as a 'technique of the self', a process of, in Mahmood's (2005) words, "cultivating and honing a pious disposition," (p. 140) which involves developing not only appropriate behaviours but appropriate emotions as well. Thus, Mahmood (2001b) speaks of the *salat*, the five daily prayers of a pious Muslim, and the various other modes of body *praxis* involved in being a proper Muslim woman not merely as how one is expected to behave but as being integrally tied up with the development of appropriate emotional states: one should not merely pray five times a day; one should also cultivate appropriate feelings in oneself such that one feels uncomfortable if one misses one of the five daily prayers.

This aspect of Mahmood's work has been contested, for example by Rachel Rinaldo (2008), in a recent study of the cultivation of Islamic piety among female members of a Muslim political party in Indonesia. Rinaldo prefers to speak of *habitus* rather than dispositions:

> … in her recent study of women in the Egyptian piety movement, Mahmood (2005) prefers to think in terms of dispositions rather than habitus, because she stresses the agency involved in cultivating a pious self. However, I employ Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus in this chapter to underline the historicity of social structures and individual dispositions (Rinaldo 2008, p. 29).

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[2] Our informants tended not to use terms such as Salafi, Deobandi and Barelvi, and were often quite unfamiliar with them, so we have avoided them in this paper.

While Rinaldo's point is significant, in that one can easily overstress the voluntary aspect of these dispositions, it is important too to avoid committing oneself to a sociological reduction in which women are merely prisoners of historically-determined social structures; in other words, in which everything is merely done *to* the women, even though they may feel that they are exercising agency. One can of course get into philosophically quite 'deep water' here, but our aim is not to take sides in relation to any kind of opposition between free will and determinism, since both are posited on a certain model of an ideally autonomous subject, and our own interest (like, perhaps, Mahmood's) is really in how certain kinds of subjectivity and the associated modes of behaving, feeling and thinking come about.[3]

The perspective that we are aiming at in our own work may be summarised informally as follows: Islam (as a set of ideas, practices, ideal dispositions, etc.) structures people's behaviour, but it also provides a body of resources which, along with other non-Islamic resources, are used by women and men as they engage with the practical problems and issues of everyday life. As people respond to their life-situations, they are acting to shape their own future selves within an overall field that is fluid and constantly transforming. This field includes 'Islam' itself as a set of ideas, practices and ideal dispositions. This picture can be made more complex if we consider that 'Islam' is of course very far from a unity, with 'traditional' forms of Bangladeshi or Sylheti Islam and the practices of particular families or communities being confronted by the various modernist ideas and movements current throughout the wider Muslim world today. The extent to which individuals may be committed to the kind of conscious crafting of dispositions described by Mahmood may vary, but all choices represent, in a sense, a shaping of one's future self.

In the case of the young Bangladeshi women in our study, a central set of problems and choices are concerned with marriage and the family. Such problems and choices include: do I get married? do I marry the person one's parents want or select? If not, how do I find an acceptable alternative? How do I stand in relation to the Western environment? If I leave the security and the constraints of the Bangladeshi community, where can I find an alternative support network or 'family'? In the following sections, we look at a number of specific areas related to these questions, beginning with the problem of how to find a suitable marriage partner.

Finding a Marriage Partner

The norm in the Bangladeshi community remains that of arranged marriage, often via an intermediary. Practices in this area are relatively fluid and, while parents will be expected to take the initiative, marriages may come about in other ways. Families

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[3] As Bautista points out, Mahmood's approach has perhaps more in common with Marcel Mauss (as in Mauss' "Techniques of the Body") than with Pierre Bourdieu, and perhaps is the better for it (Bautista 2008, p. 81).

who see themselves as traditionally Islamic will nevertheless expect fairly strong limits over the degree of interaction between potential marriage partners and young people themselves may insist on such restrictions, particularly if they identify strongly with Islam.[4]

Exactly how this works can vary. One young British-born man described how he established contact with a distant female relative via Facebook and used to speak to her regularly via MSN. He has a web-cam, so he can see her, but she does not. All this is somewhat risky, since her mother could come into the room and see his face on her computer. He is clear however that, if they were to take things further, and his parents and the girls' parents agreed, there could not be any more contact between them until the marriage. They could not even speak on the phone, since this would lead to temptation to meet, perhaps hold hands and have other contact.

Nasreen,[5] a British-born professional woman in her late 20s, describes how she had a somewhat 'non-traditional' arranged marriage:

> My husband and I, we had an arranged marriage, but it wasn't arranged in the traditional sense. What happened was, his friend's wife, I was delivering a talk around women and empowerment, and she just happened to be one of the participants there, I didn't even know her. So she asked one of my colleagues, "Who is this girl?" "She's so-and-so, she works for so-and-so organisation". When you've finished one of these workshops there's always lunch and there's always networking, so I networked with her and she asked me, you know, just generally. Then she asked my friend, "Is she married?", she said "no", "Well, is she looking to get married"? "She's not looking to get married but I know her parents are looking to get her married". It was like that. …
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> To cut a long story short, I already had other proposals, and things didn't work out, she contacted my sister, and my sister said "I can't be bothered with all of this, just e-mail her". So she e-mailed me and I had to call her up and I said, "listen, I'm not going to get involved in any of this, if you really want to deal with the proposal come and speak to my parents, that's the best way to do it". Because if my parents turn around and say no, then there is no point in me finding out about this particular individual because they are going to say no, and I've raised his hope, my hope, it's silly.

Nasreen felt particularly unwilling to go against her parents' wishes since, as the eldest of four sisters, any mistakes she made would also cause problems for her sisters.

The question of arranged marriage is made more complex in many cases by the desire of families to marry children with relatives from Bangladesh who will then migrate to the UK. Often such marriages are arranged in order to resolve debts and obligations to the parents' relatives back in Bangladesh, who may have helped to finance their migration to the UK or assisted them in other ways. Some young British Bangladeshi men may welcome marriage to a relative from Bangladesh, since Bangladeshi women born and/or educated in UK are seen as potentially

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[4] One woman we interviewed, who has adopted *burqa* and *niqab*, insists that she cannot show her face to any possible spouse. She has refused to allow her parents even to show a photograph of her to potential partners, and has threatened never to speak to them again should they do so.

[5] All names of interviewees have been changed.

corrupted by Western influences. Others may prefer a 'modern' wife. Women born and/or educated in UK however may have problems if married to a husband from Bangladesh, with 'traditional' expectations of the wife's behaviour.[6]

Regardless of the husband's expectations, and regardless of whether one, both or neither partners are Bangladeshi-born, the husband's family frequently expects an educated woman with a career to drop her career and adopt a 'traditional' young female role, subservient both to her husband and to senior members of her husband's family. Nasreen's own marriage was caught in this kind of conflict, with Nasreen being expected to stay in England and look after her mother-in-law while her husband went overseas to work. Her husband's family constantly criticized her, in part for her desire to continue her career, and she and her husband eventually separated.

The problems of arranged marriages may lead young Bangladeshis to look at ways of finding a marriage partner themselves, but this can also be problematic, given the restrictions which young women in particular are expected to obey in relation to possible contact with the other sex. One organisation that has worked towards finding a solution in this area is the Islamic Circles network in London, and we describe this in the following section.

The Islamic Circles Network

The Islamic Circles network was started in 2001 by two young British-born Bangladeshis, one from Sylheti background, the other from Dhaka. The network coordinates a variety of events, including a wide range of talks and social events on Islamic topics, martial-arts self-defence training for Muslim women (the 'Ninjabi' programme[7]), and also regular 'marriage events,' occasions for Muslims seeking marriage partners to meet together and get to know each other. Islamic Circles set up its matrimonial service in 2003 and it currently arranges at least three or four themed matrimonial events each month in London. In July 2008, for example, it organised an event for over-35 s, one for Muslim doctors and one for Muslims in the west of London. Other events have been ethnically oriented, being designed, for example, for Gujaratis, Pakistanis, Arabs or Bangladeshis. The model has been replicated with the encouragement of Islamic Circles by Muslim community organisations elsewhere in the UK.

The question of young people meeting prospective spouses at a public event is, as we have mentioned, a sensitive one within the community, and Islamic Circles defend the approach by arguing that the Islamic ban on *khalwah*, a term generally

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[6] The term 'traditional' here is problematic shorthand, given that family patterns in Dhaka in particular are themselves transforming quite rapidly in the direction of the nuclear family, with consequent conflicts and transformations in views of marriage among Bangladeshis in Bangladesh itself.

[7] See http://www.ninjabi.net/. Accessed 4 July 2008.

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Age:                          Marital Status:

Height:                       Ethnic Origin:              ┌─────────────┐
                                                          │             │
Education:                                                │      B      │
                                                          │             │
Occupation:                                               └─────────────┘

Islamic Awareness / Practice:


Looking For:




Hoping to Offer:
                                                          ┌─────────────┐
                                                          │             │
                                                          │ Attach Passport
Other Information:                                        │ sized photo only
                                                          │             │
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Fig. 3.1 Profile card for a 'brother' at the matrimonial event

interpreted as referring to the meeting together of young people before marriage, is based on a misunderstanding. *Khalwah* really refers to 'seclusion', whereby unmarried men and women meet together in private and so may be at risk of illicit sexual relations, rather than 'free mixing' in a social context:

> If there is no such word for "free mixing" in Islam, why have our scholars used *khalwah* or seclusion as its nearest equivalent, and why is there so much emphasis on trying to avoid free mixing, especially in the West where strict segregation between the sexes is not practically achievable anyway? Does simply speaking to a person of the opposite sex with whom you are not married suggest that you are trying to get closer to them on a sexual level, and are therefore doing something *haram*? What is the definition of a "mixed gathering"? How do we develop natural, modest, friendly yet non-flirty behaviour between members of the opposite sex without obsessing about free mixing?[8]

Rozario attended one of these events in May 2008, arranged in this case for "Bengali Professionals". About a hundred young men and women attended, with many of the women accompanied by a *mahram* (male relative with whom marriage is forbidden) or a girlfriend. The participants are asked to register beforehand. They fill in profile cards (Fig. 3.1). They can also provide a passport-size photograph, though few took up this option.

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[8] Islamic Circles e-mail circular, 4/7/08.

The cards (numbered B1, B2 etc. for the 'brothers' and S1, S2, etc. for the 'sisters') are placed on the walls so that the men can look through the women's cards and vice versa. The event began with Islamic prayers led by an *imam* and a talk by one of the organisers on how the participants should observe proper etiquette and behave in an appropriately *halal* manner. The participants, also labelled B1, S1, etc., are divided into five groups of men and five groups of women who meet together for group discussions on set topics. After the first group discussion, the men in the group move on to the next group of women, and so on, until all the men and all the women have had an opportunity to meet each other in the group discussion context. Men and women can then fill out cards listing the sisters or brothers with whom they would like to have an appointment; a team of facilitators, which Rozario joined, bring the couples together for short meetings.

The Islamic nature of these events is stressed. A pamphlet distributed at one of the marriage events gave the following advice for participants:

> One should first purify their intentions, i.e. to seek the pleasure of Allah by fulfilling one's obligation to seek a marital partner in a *halal* way. It should be treated as a form of worship, so that this will set a precedent for one's willingness to adhere to Islamic etiquettes throughout the event.
>
>   Listen carefully and follow all the instructions set out by the organisers.
>   Forgive the organisers and facilitators for their shortcomings.
>   Try to be in a state of ablution (*wudu*) if possible.
>   The best starting point is to recognise that you are a humble servant of Allah who is attending the event because you, like all the other participants, are looking for a spouse, and therefore want to behave in the best of manners.

Most of the men and women at the Islamic Circles matrimonial event which Rozario attended were in their late 20s to mid 30s. Other Islamic Circles events are specifically directed at over 35 s, or at divorced and widowed Muslims. As an Islamic Circles pamphlet notes:

> It is important to recognise that finding a suitable spouse is a massive problem for Muslims today. It has to be addressed practically, not just through lectures and seminars about the *fiqhi* (juristic) nature of marriage and the ideal scenario.[9]

The popularity of the Islamic Circles events confirms the view that marriage is a major problem for British Muslims. Our earlier discussion of marriage in the specific context of the Bangladeshi community suggests some of the issues that might lead people to adopt this innovative approach to finding a partner. These include: the difficulty of locating someone suitable via the traditional route of parents enquiring for suitable spouses; the preference among British Bangladeshi men and their parents for Bangladeshi-born spouses; and, the high failure rate among arranged marriages. All this is happening too, of course, in a society where many non-Muslims are also experimenting with non-traditional ways of locating marriage partners. Young Muslims are as familiar as their non-Muslim peers with online

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[9] Pamphlet distributed at Islamic Circles Marriage Event, London May 2008.

dating agencies and sites, internet social networks such as Facebook or MySpace,[10] mobile phones, online video sites such as YouTube and the whole associated new culture of electronically-mediated personal relationships which is growing as a result of these innovations.

The Hijaz Community, the second British Muslim organisation which we will discuss in this chapter, does not direct its activities explicitly towards marriage but, in fact, does play a role in it.

The Hijaz Community

The Hijaz Community is a relatively well-known institution, based at the Hijaz College near Nuneaton in the British Midlands. The College is known in particular for the presence on its grounds of the tomb and shrine of its founder, the Pakistani Sufi teacher, Shaykh Abdul Wahab Siddiqi (1942–1994).[11] This is the first and, as far as we know, still the only Sufi shrine of this kind in Western Europe, and is already of interest as recreating the most common institution of Sufi religiosity throughout Muslim Asia and North Africa, the autonomous religious establishment centred on the tomb of a deceased Sufi saint. The College campus in Nuneaton functions as a spiritual centre for the Shaykh's followers, including a number of young Bangladeshis who form part of our sample.

The Hijaz Community is by no means simply a replication of traditional Sufi religious practice. Abdul Wahab Siddiqi was a modernist in many respects, who sought to find new forms of Islamic activity appropriate to the modern world. The Sufi community which he founded in the UK, which is now directed by his eldest son, Shaykh Faiz-ul-Aqtab Siddiqi (b. 1967), and other family members, has continued his mission. Shaykh Faiz-ul-Aqtab Siddiqi, referred to as "Hazrat Sahib" within the community, is a highly articulate and active man who is clearly willing to take a leading role in Muslim affairs in the UK. This is seen in his recent proposals for a solution to the issue of the forced marriage among British Muslims, which also involve a Muslim Arbitration Tribunal under his direction. Apart from the centre in the UK, there are also centres in Australia, Canada and the Netherlands.

It is perhaps not surprising that, in many respects, the Hijaz Community presents a distinctly modern appearance. Like South Asian Sufi shrines, the Hijaz Community holds an annual *urs* or celebration of the passing of the founding Shaykh (see, for example, Sobhan 1938, p. 108). The *urs* at Hijaz has however been renamed the 'Blessed Summit' and, in some ways, the programme, which consists of a sequence

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[10] There are explicitly Islamic and Bangladeshi equivalents to MySpace and Facebook, such as http://mymuslimpage.com/, http://shhadi.com/ and http://www.circlebd.com/, as well as sites specifically devoted to locating Muslim partners such as http://www.singlemuslim.com/, http://www.muslims4marriage.com/, http://www.muslimmatch.com/ or http://www.muslima.com/

[11] For further details see Rozario and Samuel 2008.

of formal talks by various spiritual leaders as well as by young Hizaji male and female members of the community interspersed by prayer meetings, resembles a conference or a New Age spiritual gathering as much as an Islamic spiritual occasion. The new Hijaz web-site[12] presents the Hijaz path in terms that are explicitly open to non-Muslims and very much part of the corporate jargon of the early twenty-first century:

> Hijaz Community welcomes everyone from society irrespective of religion, nationality, gender, age, social class, educational background or profession. We believe in creating a community that is ready to help develop, nurture and guide everyone within it. The aim of Hijaz Community is to ensure that every member makes a definitive improvement in their life and is ready to share that value with others around them. It is only through the quality of the individual that one can ensure a truly enriched community.
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> Hijaz Community is founded on the universal principles emanating from Islam. One of these principles is that Muslims and Non-Muslims are invited to embark on a path to rejuvenate their mutual destinies. Non-Muslims are welcomed as guest members to seek a true meaning to their life, rather than simply conforming to a set ideology.
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> Members who follow Islam are encouraged to question the basis of their adherence to its fundamental principles and ensure that their affirmation of faith stems from a process of reasoning rather than a process of pure narrative.
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> * * *
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> The outcome which Hijaz Community envisages is one where the local community tends to its own needs, in balance with the needs of everyone and everything around it.
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> Hijaz Community has embarked on a dynamic programme of societal change. In order to address these vital issues, the Hijaz Community Model aims to create a shared vision of an enriched community working to bring harmony and civic responsibility back to the heart of society.

For the young people we have been meeting from the Community, who are quite close to the Shaykh, involvement with Hijaz is an all-encompassing commitment that increasingly takes over from any previous life goals or directions. Their spiritual practices involve not only the five obligatory prayers, but extra meditation and *zikr* as prescribed by the Shaykh, extensive work mentoring new or junior members of the organisation, teaching at Hijaz College, administrative and community tasks and the like. All of these young Hijazis have regular appointments with the Shaykh for what the community calls 'spiritual surgery'. These people are very self-consciously involved in a form of disciplining their body, soul and spirit towards the one goal of perfect love for Allah.

As we mentioned above, the Hijaz Community also has a role in relation to marriage, and we found several examples of marriages between Hijaz community members that had been arranged by the Shaykh. It would be an exaggeration to say that young people join the Hijaz Community primarily in order to find marital partners, but the expectation of finding a partner within the Community is certainly part of what comes with Hijaz membership. Here, it should be appreciated that joining Hijaz provides an alternative, spiritually-oriented Islamic community to replace

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[12] http://www.hijazcom.co.uk/. Accessed 28 June 2008.

the problematic everyday British Bangladeshi world, one aspect of which may well be parental pressure to accept an arranged marriage. Hijaz also transcends the ethnic boundaries of the Bangladeshi community. The Shaykh's background is Pakistani, and much of his following is also Pakistani, but the community includes Bangladeshis, Somalis and Muslims from other ethnic backgrounds, providing a wider range of possible partners who, as members of the community, might be expected to share one's values. The Shaykh can be seen as taking over the role of the parents and providing an alternative authority, allowing young Muslims from Bangladeshi and other backgrounds to move in a direction other than that endorsed by their parents.

It is hardly surprising that commitment to the Hijaz Community was, in several cases that we knew of, more or less strongly opposed by the individual's parents. Parents are likely to be concerned about the longer-term effects of their child's abandonment of standard life and career choices for absolute faith in the Shaykh and his teaching. This was an issue for Munera and Tahera, two young Bangladeshi women who were both heavily committed to the Hijaz community. Rozario had a long conversation with Munira's mother who expressed her concerns about her daughter's commitment to the Shaykh, and her consequently having given up the opportunity to undertake her higher degree. Instead, she is spending all her time and energy at the Hijaz Community.

Munira's mother insisted that children should follow their parents' wishes: "It's not as if they have to do whatever the *Pir Shaheb* [the Shaykh] tells them." She is continuing to look for a suitable husband for Munira but is worried that her daughter's devotion to the Shaykh will interfere. She and her husband have spoken to the Shaykh and told him that they will never agree if he tries to marry their daughter outside the Bangladeshi community. For her part, Munira also feels guilty about not giving her parents enough time. She tries to come home at weekends, and occasionally during the week, but increasingly finds that her duties at the Hijaz Community require her to stay there most of the time. What is more, she also enjoys the company of her fellow female teachers and administrators in the Community.

Tahera's situation is even more difficult. She wears full *burqa* and *nikab* and her father strongly disapproves of her Hijaz Community activities. He has threatened to disown her, and she has to conceal much of her involvement with the Community from him. She is under pressure to visit her family in Bangladesh but is worried that, if she does so, they will try to keep her there against her wishes. After consulting the Shaykh, she plans to disobey her parents and stay in the UK.

Expectations of Love and Marriage

We turn now to consider expectations of love and marriage among young Bangladeshis. Young people's expectations about marriage and their early experiences of marriage are explicit themes in our project and we have already gathered considerable material on these topics. This was a popular topic, and we had no trouble persuading young people to talk at length about their views.

Marriage is strongly encouraged by Islam but it is also regulated in many ways by Islamic law. The idea of the proper Islamic marriage being seen as a major part of one's religious obligations is nevertheless very common; almost all of our informants so far have, at one stage or another, mentioned the well-known *hadith* which says that marriage is half of Islam.[13]

Things can be taken further. The following, from Tasmina, another committed member of the Hijaz community, represents one extreme:

> Hazrat Shaheb [the Shaykh] and I were doing a group session on marriage – we were talking about what is love, the qualities of true love, you think about the person all the time, you think he is the best, no one better than that. You realise that all this only applies to God, it can't apply to anyone else, by definition, and so therefore what you can have in a marriage is perfection and trust. But you can't have true love unless that marriage is based on love for God.
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> So when I love my husband I hope I will love him because he loves God. I will look at him and I will see this fantastic guy. I will look at his love for God and I will look at his face and see his love for God and I will love that love and by loving him I will love his love for God and therefore I will love God … and I hope he will do the same with me. I hope to become a person he will look up and say, OK, she is not that fantastic, but she loves God and I am going to love that love in her. And then ultimately that relationship is completely selfless, I am not going to be in this for me and he is not going to be in it for him …
>
> So when we spend time together, we are going to think, oh, isn't this nice, God put us together and God put this love in our hearts, so wow this is really beautiful. And look, God gave us so much, we love God and we are going to talk about God, you know whatever interaction we have, even when we make love we will say wow, that's also a form of prayer, because you know making love in Islam is about that. When we sit together at the table we will do it for God, when we have children we will do it for God, when we separate to pray or go away somewhere else we will do it for God, when we have guests it will be for God, whatever we do it will be for God, there is not going to be any me or him in it.

One could regard Tasmina's account as an idealized fantasy, but there is something more in it than that. For one thing, it is based on a long tradition of Sufi thought about love.[14] Perhaps more importantly, it can be seen as part of a set of life-choices that offers a solution to the complexities and dilemmas of life for a British Bangladeshi woman. As a member of the Hijaz community, her life has a higher purpose than that of ordinary domesticity, and she can see herself as looking for a husband, also presumably from the community, who will share her dream and with whom she can hope to realise it. From this position, she can if necessary reject the life-choices her parents make for her, since the Shaykh is in effect a more authoritative replacement for them.

Rahima, another unmarried Hijazi woman, also sees a conflict between 'ordinary' marriage and a spiritual career. She seems less optimistic about finding an ideal spiritual partner for a husband, but refers to the idea that Allah will create love between the partners in an arranged marriage:

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[13] 'Whoever has married has completed half of his religion; therefore let him fear Allah in the other half!' (Hadith of Bayhaqi, cited in Maqsood 2005, p. 7).

[14] This goes back at least to the writings of Muhiyuddin ibn al-Arabi, which were themselves a major influence on the Western European poetic tradition through the troubadours of Provence and through Italian poets such as Cavalcanti and Dante (Samuel 2005, pp. 356–7).

One thing that, a lot of people, who are single and are trying to develop themselves spiritually, they actually fear getting married because they feel that [the marriage] will stop them from their love for Allah – I think this is a huge sign of their faith, but it's a genuine fear because where does your partner come, if you put God as your priority, but the beautiful thing is that if you do marry and it is somebody who is in similar path to you then, you know, you complement each other – well, we believe that after a *nikah* Allah will put love between the partners anyway…

Here again, we can see an ideal Islamic marriage, in which Allah takes the leading role, ensuring that all goes well between husband and wife and providing a hoped-for solution to what is in fact a very real problem for many young British Bangladeshi women, namely, how to reconcile the demands of family with the desire to lead one's own life.

Dealing with Separation and Divorce

We have already mentioned Nasreen a couple of times. She puts the failure of her marriage down mostly to her husband's family who wanted a much more traditional housewife and resented her education and her professional career. Earlier marriages in her husband's family had been with uneducated women from Bangladesh who spoke little or no English and settled into a purely domestic role.

As we noted earlier, Nasreen's situation is by no means unusual. Even where young men are interested in a modern, educated wife, their families may expect the new wife to settle down to a more traditional role, and these problems can be particularly acute when, as in Nasreen's case, the wife is living with her in-laws. Much depends in these situations on the attitudes of the family, particularly the amount of support the woman receives from her own parents. Here, Nasreen was relatively fortunate since her family disapproved of the treatment she was receiving from her in-laws and was willing to defend her and to accept her back into their house with her baby when she and her husband separated.

Separation in such a situation may lead in time to a formal negotiation of divorce under Islamic law, but it is nevertheless very stressful for the woman in particular. She is likely to be criticised by the Bangladeshi community for leaving her husband, however badly she is being treated by him or his family. Islam can play a significant role in countering such criticisms and enabling women in these positions to feel more confident about their new situation. In the following passage, Nasreen counterposes her own family's 'proper' Islamic *adab*[15] or etiquette against her husband's family's claims to Islamic values:

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[15] 'Adab is prescribed etiquette, a way of living outlined in Islam. Islam has rules of etiquette and an ethical code involving every aspect of life. Muslims refer to Adab as good manners, courtesy, respect, and appropriateness, covering the slightest acts, such as entering or exiting a washroom, posture when sitting, and cleansing oneself' (Wikipedia).

> When was I was in his [her husband's] house I was made to feel that I wasn't feeding the baby properly, I wasn't changing the baby properly, I wasn't bathing him properly, you know. I would wake up in the morning, I would go to the bathroom and find my baby not in his crib, and my mother-in-law has come in and taken him, changed him and fed him, done everything for him. And you don't do that. Like in my house, when my baby's sleeping, my sister would ask me, "*Afa*, can I pick him up"? That's etiquette, that's *adab*, to me that's *adab*. It's so Islamic to do that, to come and ask. My mum would even ask me, you know, "Shall I take him"? to feed him, yeah? And I'll say, "OK, Mum". This is my Mum asking me. My Dad asks me permission. Nobody enters our room – my Dad would *never* enter our room without asking our permission. I only share a room with my sister.
>
> S: Your parents are educated people?
>
> N: They're not, but they're people with *adab*, they have a lot of Islamic *adab*. When we have guests walking into the house, you know, we don't turn around, bad-mouth someone's mother in front of them, we don't do that. She [a woman in her husband's family] would say to me, "Your mother can't cook, your mother doesn't do this", you know. I'd say to myself, this kind of behaviour would *never* happen in my family. OK, so my sisters don't dress in the conservative way that you'd expect them to dress, but, they have a lot of etiquette about them, they have a lot of *adab* about them. My sister travels round the world, is that Islamic? But you know, because she's travelling the world, she's a lot more culturally aware and sensitive towards each individual's needs, so she's more of a better human being than *you* [her sisters-in-law] are who's never travelled and lived in a cocooned house.

As a professional woman who works in community development, running workshops on women and empowerment and similar topics, Nasreen has played an active role in the community, and was under pressure from her husband and his family to give it up for a more domestic life. Like many Muslim professional women, she considers Aisha and Khadija, wives of Muhammad who were active in the community, as examples:

> Look at Aisha, look at her role, what a significant role she played, she had a family and home going, but she also played a significant role out in the community, … Khadija, the Prophet's first wife, she was a businesswoman… Significantly older than him, and she married him, married a younger man, can you imagine in our community a 25-year old getting married to a 45-year old now? It's incomprehensible – and this is a young man who married his boss – how modern and forward thinking is that? She was a businesswoman, had her own income, he worked for her, she liked him, married him, it's a very modern thing that they did, way back in the seventh century – it's just amazing.

Nasreen also resists the way in which people in the community (here including her own father) see women as defined by their role as wives and mothers. She insists that she sees herself as defined not as a housewife but in relation to Allah:

> My dad would often say, "if a woman can't cook she's not a woman". I say, "How the hell is that Islamic?" I mean, what defines a woman? In Islam a woman is not defined by her motherhood, she isn't defined if she's a wife, she's defined by her relationship with God, and that's how her womanhood is defined, her womanhood is not defined by motherhood and wifehood and all of that kind of stuff.

Here again we can see a particular perspective in relation to Islam providing a kind of justification for Nasreen's unconventional and somewhat problematic situation, as a separated woman with a small child. This kind of usage of Islam to rationalize and make sense of an unconventional and problematic life-situation is not of course restricted to British Bangladeshis. Suraya, an educated Bangladeshi woman from

Dhaka who had a failed marriage to a Bangladeshi man in the USA, became much more religious after her divorce and her return to Bangladesh. It seemed that Islam was providing her with intellectual, emotional and spiritual resources to come to terms with her divorced status, a stigmatised predicament in Bangladeshi society. Suraya had had a well-paid and prestigious job before her marriage, but she told me after her divorce: "At present Allah wants me to look after my mother. Allah will tell me and convey to me if I am to do something else. I pray to Allah and ask for his help in my decision. If he wants something to happen, it will happen, if he doesn't, it won't happen." She went on: "I never felt so liberated as I do now. I am lucky, Allah showed me the way." Essentially, once she was able to shift the burden of making any real decisions about her own life onto Allah, she was able to relax and feel more confident. Like Nasreen, she told Rozario that in Islam, "Marriage is not a must. Women can be completely independent." In a culture where unmarried and divorced women are stigmatised, such an argument helped Suraya to cope with her situation and to feel empowered and morally superior.

Conclusion

The chapter, based on our fieldwork findings suggests that issues concerned with love, marriage and the family are clearly revealing topics to study, revealing aspects of the religious life of young Bangladeshis that have perhaps received little attention in previous studies. Islam in the British Bangladeshi community has tended to be seen primarily in terms either of the dominance of traditional values or the attractions of radical forms of political Islam. The picture we have been finding is somewhat different, and many of the young people we met, while undoubtedly strongly committed to Islamic values including those associated with an Islamic marriage and with responsibility to the wider community, are looking for ways to incorporate these values within a contemporary British context. Our research is still in progress, but we feel optimistic that it will provide valuable insights into the impact of modernist Islam on the lives of contemporary Bangladeshis in the UK and in Bangladesh.

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