‘Alhamdulelah’ and a ‘Fair Go’: Muslim Women Engage with Belonging

The goal of this article is to generate a better understanding of the lived experiences of some professional Muslim women who live in Brisbane, Australia. As such, it aims to prioritize their voices, drawing on their understandings of belonging and alienation through their accounts of resettlement. The stories are all told by generous women, women who have worked on their biographies through what the late modern theorist, Anthony Giddens, calls the ‘reflexive project of the self’ which he argues is a response to the challenge of detraditionalisation. Gidden’s work has been criticized for universalizing Western, middle class, white identities (Skeggs, 2004) and for underplaying the important continuities that tradition enables (Jamieson, 1998). Nevertheless, the idea of a reflexive project of the self is clearly a useful tool for prioritizing the voices of those who are often othered precisely because they are engaged with detraditionalising as a result of diasporic biographies. It places value on the stories that people tell suggesting that, ‘self-identity is constituted through the reflexive ordering of self narratives’ (1991, p. 244). For Giddens there is a specific focus on looking to the past to understand, reshape and share a variable sense of self that can be projected into the future in opposition to traditional narratives.
Each woman works reflexively in very conscious ways, though not necessarily in scholarly terms. Their professional identities are not all academic. Their reflexivity is undertaken in the more direct context of their daily lives within and across the public and private spheres. For example, Samane (whose narrative will reappear) was born in the Sudan but lived for her formative years officially under the auspices of political asylum in Yemen before gaining entry to Australia through the Humanitarian Visa Program. She explains that being, ‘in a Western culture affected [her] religious and traditional beliefs’ enabling her to become:

More appreciative of my Islamic identity, I became more aware of the meaning of wearing modestly; performing prayer, having a spiritual belief […] when I’m home everyone is the same. But when I came to Australia, it was kind of a search for my identity and although I am African and that could be it, however, I find my identity in linking myself to Islam […] It is in our nature, as human beings, to belong, to seek our identity and our efforts to seek that identity become more rigorous when there are many contradicting identities competing to influence us. So in Australia, for the first time, I
became exposed to people from different walks of lives, with different religious and cultural backgrounds. Amidst all this I had to find my identity which I found in Islam. I believe that if I was back home, I would never have explored this side of my personality or religion.¹

It is quite clear from Samane’s account that whilst the language is ‘everyday’, the identity work she is describing is at the forefront of diasporic scholarly work, feminist identity studies, religious studies and biographical studies. Her engagement crosses the neat boundaries set by academics as a form of containment, a conceit to enable understanding and to control messy complexities.

This article, however, straddles the everyday and the scholarly it works with the words of women in a register that even more consciously, and via different communities, also seeks to contextualise and understand. Like the world more broadly, it also partly mediates the identities of these Muslim women even though it works with their words. This article remains, like all human engagement, like Samane’s engagement itself, an act of interpretation that is an outcome of relations of power even as it (also
reflexively) reshapes those relations of power. It is, then, a joint paper enriched by a supervisor/student dynamic across Muslim and Christian cultural backgrounds. It is, however, jointly committed to pooling opportunities and skills to serve a feminist agenda of listening to women’s voices and engaging with them in ways that potentially make a difference. It proceeds with a genuine effort to be transparent and equitable despite systemic constraints.

Before turning to the stories of the women, some more scholarly work can set the scene for the boundaries within which their words may be understood. It is not the only way they are able to be understood, nor is it necessarily the ‘best’ – whatever that may mean. It is, however, one that can frame the argument that belonging, or as Samina Yasmeen calls it ‘belongingness’ (2007, p. 43), is a vital component of a more equitable form of democracy that does more than just pay lip service to plurality. As such, the reflexively formed identities of settlers, in this case Muslim women, must be able to draw upon a sense of belonging that exceeds what could be called the ‘multiculturalised’ identity of migrant or refugee.
Perhaps more than most at this time, in the West, Muslims generally, and Muslim women particularly, cannot escape the recognition that experience is over-determined by world events. In one form or another, Muslims are at the forefront of debates about Western multicultural secular identities. On the one hand, *beyond the domain of popular media representation*, it is now increasingly recognised that Islam is practiced so diversely that any sensible discussion of it in relation to identity demands geographic and cultural and doctrinal specificity. The edited collection of Raymond and Modood (2007) for example, variously interrogates the question of how best to accord institutional recognition to Muslims (among other minorities) through the very different multicultural engagements of France and Britain. It argues, in part at least, that the debate has become less polarised in the face of the increasing challenges to British attempts to promote recognition of difference contingent on private sphere practice of religion and culture and assimilationist French policies of ‘integration’ that stand against what they call the British policies of *enfermement* (enclosure).

Similarly, but in a Canadian context, Saeed Rahnema uses the phrase, ‘an optimum mix’ (2006, p.29) in reference to establishing a balance between the valorisation of difference and its dispersion. He makes an
invaluable contribution to two issues that are central for understanding Muslim contexts in the West. The first is the very high level of Muslim diversity. Muslims in Canada echo the demographic complexity of Muslims throughout the diasporic community (p. 24). They come predominantly from South Asia, West Asia and Arab countries or they may be ‘Black’. They also, however, come from lesser known countries (Japan, China, Korea, Philippines) or regions (Latin America, South East Asia). Rahnema draws on sources that suggest seventy-two major sects. He ironically suggests a seventy-third sect, ‘none of the above’, to account for secular, non religious (small ‘m’) Muslims who remain unrecognised by religious Muslims and non Muslims alike.

The second contribution emerges from detailed statistical work with these populations. Through it, Rahnema argues for a clearer recognition of the escalating economic and social marginalisation of all Canadian Muslims. Although educated at ‘almost double the national average’, their unemployment rate is ‘almost twice the national average’ (p.26) whilst employed Muslims experience ‘a sort of proletarianization’ (p. 27). This is despite higher levels of overall integration compared to other migrants. He traces how, despite diversity, the Canadian government and the media tend
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to reinforce Islam phobia by recognising only conservative religious leaders. This, Rahnema points out, creates a ‘vicious circle’ where increasingly marginalised Muslims become vulnerable to recruitment to radical, expansionist Islamist ideology. This exacerbates Islam phobia reiterating the cycle that produces the statistical outcomes. He calls, therefore, for a:

   Secular and balanced multicultural policy that respects religious minorities’ cultures whilst assisting them to develop a sense of belonging as citizens with equal rights, life conditions and opportunities. The stronger their sense of identity with Canada, the weaker would be their sense of ethnic and religious identity (p.37).

   This is Rahnema’s ‘optimum mix’ although the truth of the last line is not necessarily supported by qualitative work. Indeed, Samane’s comments about migration suggest that an intensification of a sense belonging to Islam can occur. An ‘optimum mix’ may also create a very fragile ‘optimum’ since it potentially signifies a substantive loss of valued aspects of self.

   Rahnema’s call for greater ‘belonging as citizens’ is nevertheless crucial and he is not alone in making it.
In the Australian context, alienation and marginalisation are also escalating. The collection from Celermajer, Yasmeen and Saeed (2007) demonstrates that Muslim Australian citizens have long experienced challenges related to language, recognition of qualifications, cultural difference and the refugee experience. The collection argues that these barriers have been exacerbated in the post-September 11 environment. Greater scrutiny now occurs on the basis of both Muslim visibility and nationality. Like Rahnema, the researchers in Celermajer, Yasmeen and Saeed urge public policy makers to avoid the error of conflating all Muslims with those who match the stereotypes. Both policy makers and other sectors that influence public opinion need ‘to attend more closely to the actual identities and aspirations of the majority Australian Muslims’ (Saeed 2007, pp.3-4).

Fethi Mansouri (in Akbarzadeh & Yasmeen 2005) traces the increasing alienation of Arab-Australian Muslims that emerged under the Howard government’s ‘negative, minimal form of tolerance and recognition for cultural difference’ (p. 152). Mansouri aptly quotes another late modern theorist, sociologist Zygmunt Bauman who insists that, ‘the act of tolerance diminishes […] the identity’s importance’ (In Akbarzadeh & Yasmeen 2005,
p. 152). Relativist toleration, such as that of the Howard government, is a failure of full recognition. It is standoff policy. So called dialogue becomes the agreement to mutually (and apparently harmlessly) disengage through a ‘let’s agree to disagree’ stance. Tolerance creates a gap perceived, in a confrontational situation, as a cease fire zone. As permanent policy, however, it creates the appearance of co-operation whilst allowing alienation to escalate.

The Akbarzadeh & Yasmeen collection overall, sees this diminishing writ large in the global community. The UN, for example, cannot deliver justice to Palestinian desires for self determination or promote American and British acknowledgment of Arab rights to state sovereignty in Afghanistan or Iraq. This global embedding of Mansouri’s local Australian analysis locates multicultural debates very squarely in the broader dilemmas of constituting a democratic process where recognition and sovereignty are genuinely, rather than rhetorically, engaged.

Indeed, again in the Australian context, but like Rahnema, Yasmeen draws together some of these themes and becomes more emphatic about
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belonging as a feature of democratic citizenship saying that discussions remain:

Inconclusive without reference to a need for belongingness.

Instead of being a citizen in legal or spatial terms only, an individual needs to feel that he or she is a part of the society that claims its citizenship (2007, p. 43-44).

This signals a discontent with traditional rights based formulation of citizenship in the civil, political and social spheres. It also goes beyond the responsibility model of citizenship which she links to value judgments about ‘good’ and ‘bad’ citizens.

Instead, Yasmeen takes up Thomas Janoski’s conceptualisation of citizenship as operating in four spheres (state, private, market and public spheres) and in ways that allow for *passive or active membership of individuals in a nation-state with certain universalistic rights and obligations at a specified level of equality*’ (Janowski in Yasmeen 2007, p. 43, italics in original). This articulation of the passive or active dynamic was used to evaluate the range and the outcomes of Muslim women’s *active* citizenship-related engagements in the public sphere.
In Perth at least, Yasmeen found that post 9/11 both orthodox and progressive Muslim women moved out of the private sphere to engage in a more committed struggle for self representation. Various associations formed to meet their religious, social, educational, and rights based needs. Yasmeen expects that greater participation in the market sphere and the state sphere will be inevitable as the contestation for representation of Muslim identities intensifies. The active/passive distinction is increasingly important in the struggle for recognition or ‘belongingness’. Goodman (2006, p.54) suggest that passivity and activity are central to identity formation, lying at the heart of the contradictory project of remaking identity.

This links clearly to Giddens’ ideas about reflexivity which is an active process of assertion, of ‘making’ an identity (or a narrative about identity that can then become a script). Identity, or the stability of the narrative, is also, however, continuously challenged by being in constant tension with the more passive experience of ‘being made’ by past narratives. Muslim women’s experience of this dynamic is informed in ways specific to their own understandings of race, ethnicity, religion and gender and the way these are (or are not) aligned with those of the host culture as it is represented in
the public sphere where simplistic but powerful representations compete. Like Rahnema, therefore, Yasmeen also argues that:

The inability of government agencies and representatives to understand the complexity of representation of Muslim women is also connected to the prevalent emphasis on symbolism [...] Hijab, in this context, has emerged as the definer of Muslim women-hood [sic …] the emphasis on symbols has created a condition where the wider society and state assumes that those subscribing to traditional dress code are truly representing Muslim women (2007, p. 51).

So, returning to the beginnings of this contextualization of our Brisbane subjects within academic debate, on the one hand, the complexities of Muslim identity are being thoroughly examined globally and nationally. On the other hand, this research clearly and consistently reveals that governments and media outlets contribute significantly to recurring moral panic scenarios. Ranged in opposition to increasingly nuanced understandings of pluralistic Islamic identities in the West are stereotypical
folkloric understandings that scapegoat all Muslims as ‘folk devils’ (Cohen 1987).

The symbolic stimuli for the metonymic shifts that accompany such moral panics are often images of covered Muslim women. These draw in very muddled ways on the active and passive dynamic. All ‘real’ Muslim women cover because they are passive victims of tradition (Humphery 2001, p.45) needing salvation from Muslim misogyny. Muslim women therefore experience persistent missionary efforts to convert them. Haddad, Smith and Moore state, for example, that, for many Americans, the symbolic evidence of Western victory in Afghanistan was the image of Afghan women throwing off their burqas (2006, pp.22-23). Muslim women must become uncovered ‘for their own good’.

Simultaneously, though, ‘real’ Muslim women symbolise terrorism or are terrorists. ‘Within’ the chador is the enemy. The chador itself symbolises the enemy within the borders of the state and public spheres. Inaccessible to identification, unaccompanied wearers are intruders to the public sphere from the perspective of the Muslim misogyny critiqued by the West and the perspective of minimalist multicultural policy that insists that cultural
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identity inhabit only the private sphere. Tolerance does not promote ‘belongingness’. Only full institutional and personal recognitions in both the private and public spheres (as well as, in Janoski’s terms, the state and the market spheres) can promote a ‘feeling’ of belonging. In this manifestation, covered women are therefore not passive but active agents of an expansionist Islamist political agenda. This is not recognised as separable from faith based Islam. In this scenario, then, they must be uncovered ‘for the common good’. It is a rhetoric that imagines the wellbeing of passive and rescued Muslim women at the same time as it collapses that wellbeing into the wellbeing of the West: no women should cover.

With these understandings of the ways in which the identities of Muslim women are shaped, we now analyse the everyday details of this process. Here professional Muslim women develop strategies for dealing with the tensions that arise in a public sphere that increasingly ‘multiculturalises’ them as they engage with opportunities to detraditionalise. Let’s revisit Samane, whose comment formed a part of the introduction.

In that quote, Samane recognises cultural plurality in opposition to the singularity of the distant Sudanese ‘home’. She also recognises pluralism as
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the catalyst for greater reflexivity. The rigor with which she engages this process provides insight into the passive active dynamic. Samane is determined to cross the boundary between public and private selves, destabilising the distinction to seek recognition and ‘belongingness’ in both spheres. She expresses the project of remaking identity as intrinsically contradictory: an active process of assertion and challenge is in constant tension with the more passive experience of ‘being made’. Samane is adamant that she will be active rather than passive. The phrase, ‘it could be African’ passively relegates Sudanese identity to the margins as an afterthought. When she says, ‘I find my identity in linking myself to Islam’, however, this is actively constructed. As the subject of the sentence, she is the one doing the ‘linking’. The repetition of ‘my’ before identity, and ‘myself’ before Islam, reinforces this active mode. Although ‘home’ is mentioned twice, the actively prioritised home is Islam. Finding her identity is a form of coming home and, in a less traditional society that offers ‘contradicting identities competing to influence us’, the category of Muslim seems to be the only one experienced across geographic locations. As a chosen identity, Islam offered maximum stability in this diasporic biography.
This desire for stability was evident at the beginning of Samane’s interview. She acknowledged that, after 9/11 she was ‘hesitant’ about migration, feeling that as Westerners ‘Australians would have a great deal of animosity towards Muslims’. She came, in her own words, ‘with a “baggage”. That baggage included: ‘Australians hate Muslims, I should not develop relationships with non-Muslims, people will look differently at me because I’m wearing the scarf’. This was a burden she quickly realized she did not necessarily need to carry. She actually felt,

Welcomed from the first day and as the years passed by I felt lucky that I’m in Australia and not some racist Western democracy such as France. I can practice my religion and be a Muslim without anyone looking down on me.

The initial concerns are here displaced to a European nation where public debates about the wearing of the hijab have come, simplistically outside France and in the public domain in particular, to represent a secularized democracy that marginalizes and ‘looked down’ on Muslims. Samane is relieved that she can remain loyal to the education that her father facilitated by the family’s extended residence in Yemen. Following a
change in government in Sudan, Samane’s father was granted political asylum in Yemen where he was the Sudanese Ambassador. Samane reports that:

Although we had the opportunity to move to a Western country […] my Dad wanted us to […] grow into an age where we can get the right level of religious and cultural education before moving to a totally different environment and culture.

The ‘right’ education was specifically Muslim in a Muslim cultural context. The consequences were far reaching: Samane was the only interviewee to refer directly to Allah. Indeed, Samane takes conscious responsibility for representing Islam; she is a ‘flag bearer for this religion’ and gains ‘satisfaction’ from a role she sees as ‘challenging’. She says:

My job here is to defend this religion and myself. My role is to let people know what Islam is through my actions and not through hiding my identity […] I know that Allah will reward me for this in the life after if not in this life. […] these stereotypes put a lot of pressure on me because I find
myself required to give explanations when Bin Laden does something or when a bombing happens in some remote part of our planet. I do, however, understand that these stereotypes are usually held by uneducated people, those who insulate themselves from the world and live in a bubble.

Elsewhere in the interview, she identifies the stereotypes as, ‘all Muslims are terrorists that Muslim women are oppressed and that’s why they wear the *hijab*’. She has consciously opted for an overt link to her faith, naming Allah in a way that other interviewees found unnecessary. She feels rewarded in terms associated, in the Western imaginary, with suicide bombers and fanatics. She nevertheless appears to draw strength from both articulating the commitment and living it: her practices represent an alternative, moderate, dedicated Islam. The only explosion she wants to produce is the bursting of the bubble of ignorance amongst those who are ‘uneducated’ about the ways that non political (understood as expansionist and anti-Western) religious Muslims relate to Allah in their everyday lives. She does not expect the Western state to be absorbed into Islam: it stands as the guarantor of her right to expect recognition without conflict in a diverse public sphere.
Unlike others who were interviewed, Samane’s practices are personal, opportunistic acts of what Christians call ‘witnessing’ rather than the specific development of community ties via organizations, such as those of Yasmeen’s Perth based activists. This does not mean, however, that Samane is passively retaining Muslim identity. She is consciously adopting it in a non Muslim context where its meaning has intensified. She is not averse to making adjustments, to her dress code, for example where she ‘makes a balance between wearing fashionably and observing my Islamic dress code’.

Perhaps most markedly, though, she has relinquished the ‘baggage’ brought from Yemen. ‘After six years of being in Australia’ she says, ‘I came to realize that most of those challenges and barriers were only the construct of mind’. When asked if she had ever encountered any discrimination or prejudice through her work or home life, her reply captured the complexity of her identity:

Alhamdulelah, No! I believe one of the problems that Muslim women have is that they translate every negative act from non-Muslims as discrimination, ignoring the fact that this might be because of a behavioral problem that someone
might have. I think that we only feel discrimination when, in the back of our minds we are thinking about it and hence translating every action and word as a discriminatory act. Alhamdulelah, when I walk down the street, go to the shops, go to work, I think of myself as an Australian citizen who deserves a fair go.

Though (perhaps because) it would proclaim itself through her skin color, Samane’s African identity seems to have been otherwise thoroughly shed. Her previous hesitancy about migration to Australia was the response of someone who had never done the assertive identity work that the confrontation with plurality demanded. Nevertheless, those early perceptions remain evident in this description. When Samane says, ‘the problems that Muslim women have’ and ‘they translate’, she is speaking in terms that separate her current self from Muslim women with less understanding. She does not want to be like that anymore. That was an old self, a more passive self. Whilst it is a form of subjectivity with which herself newly narrated self can still strongly identify, it belongs to other Muslim women yet to do the work of identity reconstruction in a less traditional setting. Samane slips quickly into ‘we only feel discrimination’
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and ‘we are thinking’ before re-invoking the latest ‘I’. In her present, specifically Muslim expressions sit alongside a clear grasp of the iconic Australian ‘fair go’ speaking to her belonging to both positions.

Finally, Samane has such a sense of satisfaction with her new found freedom that she is prepared to dismiss discrimination almost completely despite the loss of a public sphere that is infused with Muslim practices. It becomes a ‘behavioral problem’. This understanding seems to empower Samane: in activist mode, the assertive can overcome discrimination through reshaping their attitudes and create balance. Thus she ends with: ‘Alhamdulelah, when I walk down the street, go to the shops, go to work, I think of myself as an Australian citizen’. The perceived capacity for agency, supported by practices and attitudes that reinforce the perception, constitute this Muslim’s ‘fair go’.

Engaging in a multicultural society influences people variously and this is most evident through a focus on how Muslim women retain, adapt or abandon particular practices in ways that mean different things to different women. It would be easy to assume, for example, that abandoning prayer routines might mean a less devout Muslim. This was certainly not the case
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for interviewee Leila, (32, Iranian doctor). Leila no longer prays, no longer fasts, no longer covers her head or observes clothing restrictions. She revels in the freedom because she ‘can go out and have fun with my friends and male colleagues, even without my husband if he is busy with work’. In fact, she passes so well for a non Muslim that, ‘everyone asks’ why she does not cover. Despite this high level of detraditionalisation, 1’s life retains a religious dimension that she values as instrumental to her well being:

In Iran most of my family prays, so I felt guilty when I was living there but here I am free to choose. But I need to mention that I feel more close to God here in Australia than before. Maybe because I don’t have my family support and I feel closer to God as someone who takes care of me and listens to me. But my husband still prays and I have my own choice and way. […] I just can say that I found freedom in Australia and Western culture. Everything here is a matter of choice. For me, there are no Islamic restrictions any more. I repeat, ‘Freedom!’ and I feel more close to my ideal identity here as a Muslim woman. Now I just believe in God and Prophet
Mohammed, I don’t pray and fast anymore and even when I was in Iran and used to pray, I never prayed in Arabic language because I could not understand it. I always translated that into my own language and many times I asked my Grandma why we should pray to God or read Koran in another language. But she never had an answer. They just repeat what they have got used to.

For Leila, prayer was a socially scripted religious act emptied of personal spiritual meaning. Failure to conform brought a self imposed sense of exclusion from family contexts even though the most senior family member could not answer her questions. When choice became an option, without the family context the practices meant nothing. Even as a marker of cultural cohesion, insitutionalised religion failed Leila because language barriers intervened. Yet she remains a believer and it is to God’s ear that she speaks. Her sense of belonging to her God was not diminished by the loss of culturally expected ritual and practices.

For Sepide, (Iranian doctoral student) the recognition of the emptiness of the rituals had a completely different outcome. She says:
Western culture and Brisbane in particular has affected me […] helped me discard the superficial attachment to some rituals and be truly myself […] Brisbane I found too white which lacks the multiculturalism of metropolitan cities including Sydney. This in its own way might have pushed me even further from away religion. I mean, if I lived in Sydney, I might have still preserved some of the rituals I was adhering to because of the city’s diversity.

Without the familial, social and cultural context of a non white Muslim community, religion itself seems less magnetic and Sepide actually describes herself as ‘not religious’. Traditional public sphere values demand at least the appearance of an alignment between public and private identities that stands as a buffer to change and a support for tradition. Because of active discrimination, Sepide abandoned the hijab. ‘I didn’t find Brisbane a friendly place at all’ she says:

I have noticed people’s fears of me in their eyes, looks and behaviors when I first arrived here and had headscarf. At my department, the teacher of a course I was taking
showed open hatred towards me as a Muslim and another Professor was quite humiliating towards me […] sometimes they don’t believe in your intellectual capacity because you are a Muslim and sometimes they tend to be patronizing which is quite disgusting.

The interview with Sepide was not face to face. She responded by email, preferring not to be recorded but nevertheless keen to share her experiences. Another part of her response attributes her negative experiences to more than being Muslim:

I perceive it as more racial and ethnic issue than necessarily religious issue. Prejudice of whites towards non-whites. However when people know your originality, they tend to be biased towards you because of this stereotype of Muslim women as oppressed, passive and victim.

For Sepide, this confirms the dominance of race over religion or ethnicity. She returns to this theme, clearly trying to establish exactly what produces her experiences:
In the workplace, I perceive my nationality attracts more prejudice than my Muslimness. I mean, I don’t think people from some other Muslim countries like Turkey or Malaysia get that much prejudice even if they observe hijab. It’s mostly because of the current political tension of Iran with western countries.

Sepide engages and re-engages with the intersecting complexities of religion, gender, nationality and ethnicity seeking the narrative that makes the most sense of her personal difficulties. The experiences and reconstructions slide into and across one another leaving her feeling, understandably, insecure. She is unsure which aspects of her identity have called the discrimination into being. The possibility that it is all of them in different contexts from different perpetrators who are all fearful (and as Samane would maintain ‘uneducated’) is, perhaps, so overwhelming that it remains unimagined.

Sepide adapts by refusing the hijab ‘not to hide my Muslim identity, but not to disclose my nationality’. Here the hijab is a signifier of a cultural rather than religious identity even though other Muslim women from Turkey
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or Malaysia would potentially cover in similar ways. To all observers, it is impossible to tell, simply by looking, what motivates a Muslim woman to cover. Interviewee Marziye (29, Pakistani doctor) is adamant, however, when she says:

I think Islam is the same in all cultures and countries and we share common beliefs and I don’t agree with women who say *hijab* is a cultural thing. I do believe that covering is a religious thing.

Marziye finds Brisbane a ‘very welcoming place to live’ and remains ‘very relax and happy to live here’. This is because the perceived cross cultural sameness of Islamic diasporic space usurps the specificity of geographic place. This is reinforced by institutional recognition from within the public sphere: there is a prayer room at the hospital at which Marziye works. This enables her to relatively easily maintain the faith based rituals others abandon, though she attributes this to her faith: ‘I am very strict with my religion and nothing can change my beliefs and traditions’. Nevertheless, Marziye certainly experiences discrimination:
The problems I have faced related to my professional career was not related to my religion or my head covering and different appearance, but I faced some discriminations because of my third world background [...] for my interviews they asked me, ‘do you have any work experience in UK, US or Australia?’ And when I said, ‘no, I have worked in Pakistan’ it made situation a bit harder to find a job.

This is a good example of a contradictory or inconsistent application of multicultural policy. The hospital has a commitment to recognising difference and even has what appears to be (and may well be) a substantive follow through in terms of providing a prayer room within the workplace.

Comments from interviewee Azade, however, suggest this could easily be interpreted more cynically as a way of preventing public demonstrations of difference by creating a pseudo private space. Azade is a 45 year old African, an architect who came to Australia as a skilled migrant with her husband. Although working for the government, Azade has no prayer room at work. She is effectively forced into a compromise because people ‘don’t understand what I am doing and this may give people a negative image [...]
so I prefer to do that at home. It is between me and God’. The ‘choice’ between praying in front of others from a culture that is increasingly hostile to signs of difference or praying at home is not much of a genuine choice.

Although for the sake of her own dignity Azade expresses this outcome as an active choice where she is the agent who ‘prefer[s]’ to pray at home, this is a good example of being acted upon by the public sphere. It is also a good example of how badly people want to belong rather than be labeled as or represent difference; there is an emotional investment in ‘passivity’ because it offers the reward of belonging in the terms of the host culture.

Marziye, does not face this dilemma because the workplace has a dedicated prayer space, however it might be interpreted. She does experience contradictions in multicultural policy though through an interview process that prioritises, or makes its candidates feel that it only values western training. Marziye minimises this problem in several ways: firstly, her professional identity is less important than her religion where her needs are recognised and met. She constructs her identity assertively and predominantly through her religion and this actually enhances her experience of Islam:
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In Pakistan majority of people are Muslim, you don’t feel your differences between yourself and others, but here I feel it. I am different with others in terms of clothing and beliefs, I really feel that I am a Muslim woman here […] there is freedom here to practice your religion or not, everything depends on yourself.

Secondly, Marziye, like Samane, has enough confidence to persist. She sees herself as the writer of her own story; even when the plot does not instantly unfold in accordance with her desires ‘everything depends on yourself’. She still feels ‘lucky’, though and this is because the public sphere, again, is understood to stand as guarantor of that freedom. Even if it is a ‘minimalist’ recognition, or a mixed message, it remains relatively more liberal than the country of origin so that it is the country of origin’s tradition that constitutes a sense of being in the ‘lucky’: in the ‘lucky country’. Indeed, compared to Azade, who had to get a second Masters degree to complement her Sudanese degree before she could work as an architect, Marziye is lucky. Working in medicine, an area where there are labour shortages, no doubt helps the luck along.
The way that people tell their stories to themselves, interpreting events in the light of their own conscious and unconscious needs and desires, powerfully shapes their perceptions. Interviewee Arezou is also from Pakistan (24, Muslim Youth Community Officer) and has come to Brisbane from Darwin. Compared to Darwin she finds Brisbane,

Not that comfortable for me, it [Darwin] was a smaller place and more multicultural, but I am going to get used to it. I am the kind of person who usually smiles at people and says hello in the bus and public.

Despite sharing her country of origin with Marziye, Arezou was raised, as she says, ‘almost’ in Australia, wears *hijab* but feels strongly that:

[I]f I went back to Pakistan I can recognize my rights as a Muslim woman and I understand what is cultural practice in Pakistan and what is religion. For instance, domestic duties […] I know that if a woman cook or clean for her husband, it is just a favor and he has to pay for it […] I know that as an outsider but Pakistan’s women are not educated about
these things and they think it is their duty to do domestic things and there is no other choice

While she may (or may not) appreciate the difficulties in resisting cultural pressure, Arezou’s optimism enables her to ‘depend on herself’ in the way that Marziye proclaims as necessary. Like Samane, she also draws on the idea that those who are different from her are ‘uneducated’ and that her own knowledge gives her an important role to play in creating understanding through modeling the alternative behaviors that signify a range of beliefs. Her determination to ‘get used’ to Brisbane by literally grinning and bearing it has been put to the test in ways not dis-similar to those of Sepide. Arezou also had a classroom experience that could well have led to discarding the *hijab*:

[I]n the third year of my university, one of my lecturers was scared of me. You could feel it in her face and it was not only my feeling, my other classmates even told me that whenever to come through the class her face look different and you can feel the fear in her face. And then I did not
approach the class anymore and instead send her emails to ask my questions.

There is a possibility that Arezou, like Samane, was carrying ‘baggage’ in the form of misperceptions of people’s fear. She was, after all, resettling from a more multicultural Darwin where her sense of belonging to a smaller, more diverse community was stronger. That possibility is countered here, however, by the support of classmates. Rather than abandon the hijab, though, Arezou avoids confrontation by retreating from the shared public space and completing her course from within her private space where she can retain her dignity. Bringing her resilient optimism into play, she also reminds herself that this was a ‘specific case, my other teachers were really encouraging and nice to me’. Specifically like Sepide, but in common with all the women here, Arezou also tries to work things out as she straddles two cultures, moves between public and private spaces with different expectations. 3 Because she wears hijab, she found that,

In clothes shops the shop assistant looks at you strangely, looking at you like, for example, you don’t wear clothes like us what are you doing here? Sometimes people act racist,
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like go back to your country […] and after September 11th
quite often they directly mention that, call you a terrorist.

This overt hostility (both in Darwin and Brisbane) also occurs when Arezou refuses to abandon the practice of not shaking hands with men in work meetings. She does this ‘very politely’, explaining why and ‘never had a problem only once’ when:

The gentleman refused to look at me through the whole meeting. He was very upset and refused to even talk to me and he said, ‘If you don’t want to shake my hand, get out of here’. And that was the only time I felt a bit irritated and it was one gentleman out of a hundred.

Again, then, Arezou’s strategy for managing hostility is to remind herself that it is the minority response. She doggedly retains a perspective that insists on looking ‘at challenges in a positive way, as opportunities’. She is adamant, too, that the ‘West allows you to be a better Muslim than the country that the majority are Muslims’. This is regardless of her experience of Brisbane’s larger multicultural context as ‘uncomfortable’. This stands in stark contrast to Sepide’s attribution of lapsed faith to the smallness of
Brisbane’s multicultural scene in comparison to Sydney. Clearly the same place can be experienced very differently according to a person’s previous engagements, their natures and their sense of belonging to place and faith.

One area of difference that consistently refused to yield to understanding was the Western emphasis on alcohol. Not one woman claimed to have broken this Muslim restriction. Several expressed concern and bewilderment about its dominance in Australian culture. En found some ‘gatherings’ were not ‘reachable’ because of alcohol, she simply did not attend. Marjan found ‘some situations a bit restrictive’. Sometimes she would go and say she did not drink and ‘get my point across’, other times she would not go because that effort was too great. Leila worry about bringing up her son in a drinking culture but still prefers that to Iran’s restrictions.

In responding to Saeed’s call ‘to attend more closely to the actual identities and aspirations of the majority Australian Muslims’ (2007, pp.3-4) these accounts highlight some recurring themes. We can simply list these and facilitate an important acknowledgement of the challenges that are a daily feature in the lives of these women. This accords an important degree
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of respect. So, for example, not all Muslim women experience place in the same way; place is relative to her previous experiences; not all women interpret the hijab as a symbol of religious devotion, for some it is a cultural allegiance; not all uncovered women are atheist Muslims belonging to Rahnema’s ironic seventy-third sect; not all who cover are religious; understanding more about how Muslim women construct their identities drives home the point that identity is a combination of active, agency driven outcomes (like covering, praying, drinking, working, juggling expectations, managing shop assistants) and passive impositions difficult to challenge alone (like not having a prayer room, the refusal to accept previous training).

It is also useful, though, to recruit recognitions to a comment on the dangers of being too quickly prepared to support a minimalist multiculturalism. We can emphasise the value of apparent contradictions. Firstly, Muslim women who appear to become less traditional may nevertheless experience intensification of their religious Islamic identity. This intensification may be due to the realisation that Islamic expression is diverse. This creates greater flexibility not in Islam per se, but in the ways women make sense of their religious identities. It may also be because being Muslim becomes a conscious and active choice rather than a passive default
position within a broader Muslim context. This may produce a greater investment in spiritual life even where traditional rituals are absent.

The value of this understanding is that it undermines the idea that all ‘true believers’ in Islam are Islamists. This dilutes the symbolic power of the covered woman who is read as a generalized threat to the West through political and ideological *jihad*. Such Muslims do exist and some of them may well be women. But understanding how spirituality can be intensified *at the same time* as there is an appreciation of the freedom for it to be retained and developed, supports a rational refusal to succumb to moral panics. This, in turn, is important because that specific fear potentially underpins the reluctance to enable public, institutional recognition. Such recognition is required for the more substantive belonging that moves beyond rights and responsibility models of citizenship to Yasmeen’s ‘feeling’ of ‘belongingness’.

Secondly, these narratives help to understand the seductive appeal of maintaining difference in the private sphere. We see this play itself out several times even in this small sample of women: completing a class from home to avoid upsetting a lecturer; praying at home; removing the *hijab* to
pass as non Muslim; feeling ‘lucky’ when working twice as hard to gain a public sphere outcome that others clearly gain more readily; taking constant individual responsibility for making it right. All these are survival strategies in an environment of minimalist multiculturalism; they are ways to rest from the continuous effort of ‘being’ in the public sphere; they also reinforce the division because this is all genuinely better than being a professional, nontraditional Muslim woman in the countries of origin. There is relative freedom, even if it does not enable a feeling of belonging; there is relative freedom, even though it may be dependent on a disavowal of discontent; there is freedom, providing Muslims and other minorities accept the imposed obligation to keep their belonging status on the agenda. In a public sphere that is emphatically not value free (and minimalist multiculturalism is the evidence of this reality) such demands, even though socially engineered, reinstate Islam phobia and the vulnerability of Muslim women.

Finally, and to close, these ‘reflexive projects of self’ help to understand that identity work is a process that, for minorities in particular, always (and in all ways) proceeds as a response to personal, cultural, national and global forces. Tahere, an Iranian doctoral candidate describes it in the following terms:
I have seen two different cultures. I have the privilege of choosing whatever element I want from either of them. I always say that, I am Iranian, living in Australia, so I can never be 100% Iranian or 100% Australian. I am somebody with my own third culture which has elements of both cultures, and that third culture is MINE so I am trying to construct my identity and I am in the process of that and I have more means about that.

For many of these women, this ‘third culture’ is characterised by a sense of having access to the ‘means’ by which agency can enact more informed choices. The shortfall in reaching a status of 100% Iranian or 100% Australian is not articulated as a loss; it is articulated as a gain, a way of being more because one is not totally either. This doubles the task of creating ways to generate ‘belongingness’.
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REFERENCES:


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NOTES:

1 All names have been changed. Transcripts held by Zirakbash. Further engagement with these interviews can be found Zirakbash, Farnaz 2008, ‘Professional Muslim Women in Brisbane-, Australia: Discuss Challenges, Barriers and Opportunities’, Master’s thesis, Griffith University.

2 For more information on the way that education shapes the detraditionalising process, see Zirakbash & Lovell “The Paradox of Education: Professional Muslim Women in Brisbane”.

3 Feminism has long recognised the interpretive advantages of operating as a minority in a host culture. Narayan in Harding 2004 has done some interesting recent work problematising this in relation to Indian women.

4 Space does not permit a discussion of how even the wearing of hijab as a religious symbol can actually be understood as liberatory by Muslim women. For an interesting discussion of this, though, Zirakbash & Lovel, P.19.

5 This has been taken up in greater detail in another paper where it is analysed in relation to educational backgrounds See 2 above