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## Muslims in Great Britain and their Struggle with Identity

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## Capstone Project

# Muslims in Great Britain and their Struggle with Identity

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GS: 401 Capstone Seminar

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**Introduction:**

When most people think of the people of Great Britain, the conjured image of its population is most commonly Caucasian. The Media portrays it as such, and without a proper visit, the minority communities go quite unnoticed. Great Britain has one of the largest Muslim populations in all of Europe. Most of this population immigrated from South Asia and the Middle East, while others hail from African countries such as Somalia. A significant quantity arrived in large groups as refugees, leading to an unprecedented boom in Muslim population within European countries.

While many are tolerant, accepting, and kind toward these people, others are not so welcoming. Muslims in Great Britain experience drawbacks from this lack of acceptance, and they are subject to discrimination, and bigotry. For individuals who migrate or mature in this perhaps hostile environment, an intrapersonal conflict with identity can arise. This issue has global significance because Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world and the second largest religion in the world at the moment (Pew Research, 2017). About 24% of the world's population is Islam and by the end of this century, Islam is expected to be the number one religion in the world exceeding Christianity (Pew Research, 2017). The Muslim population in the West is increasing due to the current refugee crisis. It is imperative that we understand how Muslims are adapting in the Western world. This report aims to find out how is the Muslim identity affected by the integration of the British society?

**Literature Review:**

Tension between Muslims and the British is due to the lack of knowledge the British have about the religion of Islam. Many European countries believe “Muslims are considered, by some to be an alien minority, with social and cultural values and belief system diametrically opposed to those of the West” (Khan, 2002). This is relevant because in the West, specifically in Britain, the primary religion that is practiced is Christianity. When immigrants arrived in their country with a new religion they were unfamiliar with, the British felt apprehensive. One reason being, “The presence of Muslims in Europe in testing the notions and principles of liberal pluralism in European societies” (Khan, 2002). Europeans believe the Muslim community does not share the same values as their society. Public figures in Britain were quite outspoken about their disapproval of the Muslim community. Conor Cruise O’Brien, the former Postmaster General, made some comments about Muslims suggesting that “Muslim society looks profoundly repulsive because it is repulsive from the point to Western post Enlightenment values” (Khan, 2002). This statement created a divide between the two communities. While some British people agreed with this statement, the Muslim community was extremely offended.

This issue between Muslims and the British caused some of the British Muslim population to self-segregate. Phillips (2004) explains, “The concept of self-segregation rests on an oversimplified construction of ethnic identity, which understates the permeability of boundaries between sociocultural and religious groups.” Communities of Pakistani and Bangladeshi Muslims were viewed as poor, and were socially isolated. The British believed “the Muslim communities are endangering the security, ordered stability, and national identity of (white) Britain” (Phillips, 2004). This idea indicates the shame whites in Britain for having new populations of people in their country, and do not wish to be associated with the Muslims in any way. The self-segregation resulted in riots in 2001. These riots insinuated political and public

issues. Tension between the Muslim community and the British has only increased and is still present today. Now, “Muslim people’s identification with Britishness is thus likely to be highly varied, flexible, and contextualized” (Phillips, 2004).

According to the Muslim Council of Britain, 4.8% of the British population is Muslim, equivalent to approximately 2.7 million people (Muslim Council, 2015). Unbeknownst to many, nearly half of this community was born within the country. London and Birmingham, the largest cities in Britain, contain the highest concentration of Muslim people, reporting 12.4% in London’s population and 21.8% of Birmingham (Muslim Council, 2015). Britain itself is not particularly large in size, so the sudden increase was more than noticeable. Citizens with little education and no warning were suddenly forced to coexist with a new people, and while one would hope for a smooth transition, the truth is less than fantastic.

John Eade (1994) describes the lives of Bangladeshi Muslims living in Britain. Entering a foreign country is daunting enough, but relocating entirely is a true challenge. People fleeing corrupt governments and violent wars are faced with racism and discrimination because of their race and religion. They were viewed as different from British people and were treated as though they were not welcome. This social rejection led to difficulties getting a job to provide for their families, resulting in a fight for limited resources. In summation these factors further affect self-confidence by making one feel their identity is responsible for their treatment. Meanwhile these Muslims still seek acceptance, and would to live just like any other British person given the opportunity.

As I previously mentioned, Somalian immigrants make up a sizeable portion of Britain’s Muslims. Berns Mcgrown (1999), talks about the experiences of Somalis in Britain. In London, there were 40,000 Somali immigrants by 1995 (Mcgrown, 1999). Not only do the Muslims

experience discrimination because of their religion, but they also are victims of racism because they are Black. The common Western image of Muslims is heavily misrepresented as Arabic (and unfortunately terrorist), but those who racially identify as Black face similar discrimination as African Americans do in the United States. This has created difficulty for them in forming an identity in Britain, as the only places they are accepted is among one another. Somali parents detail the difficult questions of identity, particularly religious entailed in being Muslim in the secular Christian West” (McGrown,1999). Raising a child with traditional values in a non-traditional environment is sure to be a struggle. Parents can work to instill the beliefs of Islam, but their children still have to face the harsh realities of the society they live in. In addition, the British society has already been brainwashed by the media and politicians to reject Muslim people.

Ismail Einashe (2017), a journalist at Columbia University, shares his story about his family who immigrated to Britain from Somalia as refugees. When Einashe arrived in Britain as a young boy, he and his family spoke absolutely no English. They managed to find housing in a poor neighborhood in London, and often experienced racism and discrimination for being Black and Muslim. As time passed, Einashe enhanced his English speaking skills, and earned the opportunity to attend good schools. Einashe expresses that during his time living in Britain, he still never felt as though he truly belonged. When he officially received British citizenship, he claims he felt as though he was a second class citizen, unequal with the rest. “Many commentators questioned whether being a Muslim and British were consistent identities; indeed whether Islam itself was compatible with liberal democracy” (Einashe, 2017). Balancing two identities physically at odds with one another in society creates an environment for self-hatred.

During this time, Britain was experiencing riots and terrorist attacks. The tragic London bombing in 2005 was the most significant at the time. This incident killed 52 people, and injured hundreds. The individuals responsible for the bombing were known to be Islamic terrorists. The event created an unsatisfactory reputation for the Muslim community. Despite concrete evidence linking each incident to Muslim terrorism, tension in the country amongst Muslims and British people still increased. In addition to the terrorist attacks, a law created in 1914 was suggested that would allow the British government to revoke citizenship of naturalized citizens. This struck fear into each and every settler hoping to receive it. Obtaining citizenship can be a lengthy legal process, it would be extremely devastating to finally receive your citizenship then have it revoked soon after. Fortunately, “in 1981 a law was put into place that prevented naturalized citizens from having their passports revoked if it made the individuals stateless” (Einasse, 2017). This supports Einasse’s argument stating he and many other British Muslims identified themselves as second-class citizens. They feel the country they call home will never fully accept them.

Margaret Warner (2016), explains how British Muslims that are struggling with their Muslim identity in a non-Muslim nation. One of the biggest struggles for a Muslim person in Britain is maintaining their traditional Muslim values whilst trying to participate in mainstream western culture. This is where the identity clash begins. For example, the consumption of alcohol is not permitted in Islam. This distinctly separates the communities socially, for the chance of celebrating in a pub or bar over drinks is out the window.

This identity-crisis is further complicated by the overwhelming “terrorist” stereotype. When shunned from society, people often will turn to anyone who is willing to take them in. In the case of Muslim people, some have found comfort in terrorist group simply because they face

no resistance. These insecure individuals feel like they belong with them and that they are part of a great cause, which then leads to homegrown terrorism. Terrorism is a global issue, evidently one of the most concerning issues we have today. The most recent attacks have occurred in Britain and other European countries such as France and Belgium. What is disappointing to learn, is these attacks were primarily are a result of individuals not feeling welcome in the country they call home.

Hassan Ansari (2005) expresses the significance of radicalism in Islam. Radicalism is the beliefs or actions of people who advocate for political or social reform. It has been found that some British Muslims support the radical and extremist Islamic groups. The individuals who decide to become extremist and radicalize Islam usually are struggling with their own identity. Many terrorist attacks that have occurred in Britain have been committed by British Muslims themselves. They are people who were born, raised, and even educated there. Although they call Britain their home they do not feel welcome nor accepted. These individuals are called the “rootless” (Ansari, 2005) because they do not have a real connection with their homeland. Some have simply never been, which is quite reasonable considering the conditions they or their parents left under, but they also do not have a connection with where they currently live. As a result, a great deal turn to extremist behavior simply for the acceptance.

Terrorist groups will reach out to these young people who they know are feeling lost. They begin to persuade them to join because they will have a home with them, and will feel welcome. These are the exact qualities British society is fails to provide for these young British Muslims. The British society and media could benefit to stop and question themselves and their roll in these recent events. The fact that they have made Muslim people who are part of their society feel so uncomfortable and unwanted to the point they choose to turn against their own is

dismal. This is significant because the number of volunteers will forever increase as this social behavior continues. There needs to be a point where British Muslims can claim their identity and not feel separate.

Sara Khan (2017) explains how British Muslims today should reclaim their identity. The extremists have ruined the true meaning of what being a Muslim is supposed to be. Extremism is a huge problem in Britain for many years now. More and more individuals are unfortunately turning to extremism due to rejection by society. Sadly, there are even children as young as 10 years of age that are declaring their support of terrorist groups. It seems as though society has grouped all Muslims together as one identity but Khan argues otherwise. Society is failing to see how so many young Muslims are excelling throughout their lives. It should be proclaimed that “Many are contributing in areas such as art, music, politics, fashion, armed forces and police” (Khan, 2017). Khan (2017) advocates for British Muslims to define what being a British Muslim means to them.

Emma Howard (2014) reports on a collection of questions and answers by British Muslims describing what it's like for them being Muslim in Britain today. There was a mixture of answers. Some people have positive experiences and some have negative experiences. The questions were answered by men and women of different ages, ethnic background, and occupations. One of the questions which made quite the impression read, “Do you consider yourself British?” (Howard, 2014). A Muslim male responded that he would not proudly call himself British. He further elaborated, “It's simply due to the prejudiced view of certain people living in Britain who feel that this is not "our" country because we have a somewhat different lifestyle and upbringing to theirs” (Howard, 2014). This answer is significant because it once more brings forth the theme of not having shared values, and British society believing that

Muslims are unable to fit into their liberal society. When asked about how they would identify themselves, they claimed to be “Muslim, Bengali, and *then* British” (Howard, 2014). This common response does represent the priority of religion and culture in life over legal nationality.

One of the biggest highlights for the Muslim community in Britain was when London elected its first Muslim mayor in 2016, Sadiq Khan. This news brought Muslims everywhere in Britain hope because they were presented with a leader who understood their life experiences. On the other hand, this news did receive some negative reactions because some British people felt as though he would be biased towards Muslims with his decision making. Some believe that “The only way Islam will cease being an issue is when everyone, Muslim or not, is deemed to share the same rights, and is held to the very same liberal expectations” (Nawaz, 2016). Although Khan is Muslim, he does not share the same conservative views as the rest of the Muslim community, but this still did not help him gain support from other British people. He was also viewed in a negative light by some British people because he was known to have affiliations with some Muslim extremists. This was disappointing to some Muslims who disagree with extremists’ values because they did not want society to view all Muslims as the same. He was also seen as untrustworthy for his liberal approach to politics. Khan’s political career is a clear example of how difficult it can be to claim an identity. There is always pressure from both sides to represent themselves in a certain way.

Another group in the Muslim community that struggle with their identity is the gay community. Rusi Jaspal (2016) explains the gay Muslim population in Britain and their underrepresentation. They are found more in London because the city is very liberal. The gay Muslims in Britain feel conflicted because they are not confident enough to reveal their true identities. Despite living in a liberal city such as London, it is unfavorable to be gay and Muslim.

The reason why is because homosexuality is frowned upon in Islam. However, homosexuality in a city like London is viewed as normal and nothing to be ashamed of.

Jaspal (2016) provided results from a survey of British Muslims and their opinions on homosexuality. The survey states that none of the Muslims that were interviewed viewed homosexuality as morally acceptable. Another survey did reports that 18% of British Muslims agreed that homosexuality should be legal and the rest disagreed (Jaspal, 2016). Also, 47% of British Muslims did not believe that it was acceptable for a gay person to be a teacher (Jaspal, 2016). In addition, the mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, received negative backlash and death threats from the Muslim community because he was in favor of same sex marriage. This is a representation of how much some people in the Muslim community are against homosexuality.

Jaspal (2016) shares answers during some interviews with gay British Muslims. One individual stated they believe the liberal British society is to blame for being gay and behaving the way that they do (Jaspal, 2016). Another person went on to say that they hope to someday change their ways for the better (Jaspal, 2016). This is clearly a conflicting position to be in because both identities of being Muslim and gay do not share the same values and it would be difficult both for identities to coexist.

Another population that is conflicted also with their identities are the Muslim non-believers. These are individuals that were Muslim but have chosen to leave the religion. Their experiences are still negative because they still experience discrimination from both sides. Many of them also fear for their lives. One male claims that he does not want anybody to know where he lives because they might burn his house down. Another person is afraid of what might happen to their parents. Much of their discriminations comes from their families because parents are

often disappointed when their children have now left their religion. These non-believers suffer from loneliness and isolation because they do not know where they belong now.

One of the most interesting sources produced by the British Broadcasting Corporation published in Britain titled *Muslims like Us* (2016). This documentary was divided into 3 episodes. The documentary is about a group of Muslims that were put to live in one house and they had to learn to coexist with one another. The individuals were all from different races, genders, and ages. Some were raised Muslims and some of them were individuals that converted to Islam. The purpose of the documentary was to showcase to the British audience that Muslims are a diverse group of people and that they do not all fit the negative stereotype that the media normally shows. Each individual in the documentary struggles within their identity.

One example was a young female who felt as though she was always being judged by her appearance and behaviors. She claimed the reasons why are because she doesn't wear the hijab, she wears makeup, she wears dresses and other clothing that are not considered traditional Muslim attire. In addition, she sometimes goes to nightclubs and other social events. She has had comments made about her not being a true Muslim and that she should be ashamed of herself. These negative comments came from both Muslim and British people. This had an effect on her confidence and identity because she was making a strong effort to fit into both groups. She argued that she is just as Muslim as anybody else and that she often prays and has her own relationship with God. Her experience shows that it can be difficult maintaining traditional Muslim values and also trying to have a lifestyle like the modern westerners.

## Theory:

Identity is a concept that we as humans never really think too much about because we just feel we are existing. This feeling of knowing oneself is based on an assumption of stability that is central to both everyday theories about the self and more formal theories about the self. Identities can be focused on the past-what used to be true of one, the present-what is true of one now, or the future-the person one expects or wishes to become, the person one feels obligated to try to become, or the person one fears one may become. Social identities involve the knowledge that one is a member of a group, one's feelings about group membership, and knowledge of the group's rank or status compared to other groups.

Social theorist Homi Bhabha discusses identity in much of his work. Bhabha (1994) claims that there is always a colonial presence when it comes to cultural identity. This is significant because many countries around the world have been colonized by a European country. This is especially true for Great Britain where many of the Muslims immigrants have migrated too. As a result of colonialism, many countries are now able to speak English like the British or have converted to Christianity as religion. In addition, because of Great Britain's colonial past, many of the people in the countries they colonized have immigrated to Britain. Countries such as Bangladesh and India, like I previously stated have the largest Muslim population in Britain. This is a clear example of hybridity being present in many cultures. Hybridity is the mixture of cultures, mainly based on the result of colonialism. For people to claim their cultural identity, it is important to understand the history of their culture.

Stuart Hall (1996) has input on the theory of identity. Hall suggests that there are three different concepts of identity. The first is the Enlightenment subject. This is mainly based on the individual that is fully centered within themselves. The individuals are very much certain about

their consciousness and actions (Hall, 1996). These individuals are significant because they have experienced this self-endowed feeling since birth and they are commonly males. The second concept is called the sociological subject. This concept helps close the gap between the “inside” and the “outside” between the personal and the public worlds (Hall, 1996). In regards to cultural identities, we like to project ourselves in our cultural identities while also internalizing their meaning and making them a part of who we are as individuals.

The third concept is the postmodern subject. This includes a “movable” which means that the identity is always transforming continuously in regards to the way we are viewed in our cultural systems (Hall, 1996). This also includes when the individual claims different identities at different times. The Muslims in Britain are currently living in a modern society and are experiencing the effects of it. As Muslims, they are trying to juggle two different cultures of their homeland and the modern and always changing British society. There is a constant feeling of claiming both identities of a modern British person and a Muslim. The traditions of the Muslim culture is completely different than those of their homeland.

Many young people form their identities from the different influences around them. The young Muslim living in Britain are partaking in Global Consumer Culture. This concept “represents a consumption oriented cultural entity unbounded by geography, as the result of the accelerating multiplicity of physical, virtual, internet media, exchanges among peoples, cultural, portrayed themes and values” (Cleveland, Bartikowski, 2018). In the West, the media has significant influence in young people’s lives. Whatever the media produces, young people attempt to replicate what they see on the in the media. They desire to look, dress, or act the way that their favorite celebrities or public figures do. This is a conflicting issue for the young Muslim population because they want to keep up with the latest trends within the British society,

but it can conflict with their Islamic values. This can include the way they dress, and behaviors such as drinking and smoking. On the other hand, some have found a balance. “Many people are identified with Global Consumer Culture, while retaining an identity based on global and local cultural narratives simultaneously” (Cleveland, Bartikowski, 2018). These are the individuals that want to claim both their Muslim identities but also claim that they are a westernized individual.

### **Methodology:**

For my research, I focused more on qualitative research. I gathered information that I have researched from news articles, interviews that have been conducted, and scholarly sources. The news articles provided detailed information about events that occurred, and I was able to apply in my writing. The scholarly sources were helpful secondary sources because they provided theory and the history of Muslims in Britain. This helped clarify the tension between the Muslim and British population. Within the qualitative research, I included some secondary sources. These articles were primary sources that included interviews that were conducted to receive answers from British Muslims themselves. I was able to use the answers from the interviews to support my argument. In addition, I included a small portion of quantitative research. I used a document from the Muslim Council of Britain. This document provided statistics and facts about the Muslim people in Britain.

### **Findings and abstract/Analysis:**

In my findings, I learned the history of Muslim in Britain. Many of the Muslims immigrated to Britain many years ago from their homeland to seek a better life. The majority are from South Asia and Africa. When these immigrants arrived in their new home the British were

uncomfortable with the idea of a new religion in their country. This caused tension between the Muslims and British community which is mainly Christian. The tension arose because of the lack of shared values between the two communities. Religion is a big part of their lives and it is evident that they are proud of it. Many British had negative comments to say about the Muslims that had arrived in their country. This issue caused segregation between the two communities. Many of the Muslims were suffering because they couldn't find employment to support their families. In addition to discrimination and racism. This made them feel like they were unwelcome and insecure about their identities.

One theme I discussed was homegrown terrorism. Many young Muslims in Britain often experience discrimination because of their religion have turned to terrorist activity. The reason being is that they feel as though they are not accepted as Muslims among the rest of the British. When they join terrorist groups, they feel like they have a home in which they belong. In addition, when they participate in terrorist activities, they have been brainwashed to believe that they are doing it for the good of the world. Unfortunately, this issue has resulted too many terrorist attacks in Britain. Majority of the individuals that have committed terrorist acts in Britain were born and raised there. These individuals were born and raised in Britain but have decide to turn against their country.

Through my findings I have also discovered that young Muslims in Britain struggle with their identity because they haven't found a balance of being Muslim and a modern Westerner. The reason why is because their religion and the liberal British society can sometimes clash because there are no shared values. Some things in the British society maybe be found acceptable such as revealing clothing, drinking, smoking, nightclubs or social events. These are activities that many young people in the West enjoy doing so it can very conflicting for young Muslims

who also want to participate in these activities because they also want to maintain their traditional Muslim values. When these individual do try to find a balance they sometimes get judged by the Muslim community and the British community as well. The Muslim community will view them as not behaving like a true Muslim and the British community will make them feel like an outsider. It is almost impossible for them to get the best of both worlds.

**Conclusion:**

In conclusion, in order to bridge the gap between Muslims and the British, the British need to practice being more open minded and tolerant of other religions besides Christianity. The West believes that Muslims are intolerant to others, but it's quite the opposite. Muslims are behaving tolerant of other religions being that they immigrated to a new country which they were well aware was not a predominantly Islamic country. Most western countries such as Great Britain, the United States, and other European countries have a misconception of Muslims and are prejudice based on stereotypes or images they see on the media. Being more tolerant and open minded can be achieved if the British were to become more educated on the religion and culture of Islam. Proper education would be beneficial and can help reduce the negative idea of Muslims. Education can also help reduce the Islamophobia that is present in Western society. By learning more about the religion and people, it can help eliminate the hatred and confusion.

In addition to education, integration between the two communities can also be favorable for reducing the tension. Many Muslims have been isolated in poor neighborhoods especially in London. As well as self-segregation like I previously mentioned. Some of the Muslim community have segregated themselves because they felt like they were unwelcomed and were constantly being judge for their way of life. They created their own communities where they are free to practice their religion freely and feel safe. Once both communities learn to coexist with

one another, the tension will decrease and British Muslims can feel confident when claiming their identity.

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