State containment and closure of gendered possibilities among a millennial generation: On not knowing Muslim young men

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Abstract
Within a British context, the South Asian Muslim community is currently a significant media spectacle with a millennial generation of British-born young men inhabiting public personae that officially are perceived as being a 'suspect community'. An epistemological assumption of this perception appears to be that religion is the dominant and exclusive social category shaping their behaviour. Using qualitative research that synthesizes postcolonial and critical men's studies, this article explores how Muslim millennial men are ‘categorically’ contained with accompanying forms of (de)gendering. The article is based upon research with Birmingham-born millennial young men of Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage, aged 18–25. The research found that a major effect over the last few years of establishing a securitized regime involving ascribed values, reviled violent bodies and designated locations has been to circumscribe the spaces within which Muslim young men are able to perform masculinities in public spheres. The ‘no-go’ spaces of hard physical borders and the increasing complexity of imagined (post-Brexit) borders have imposed racially intensified patterns of stratification in austerity Britain. We conclude by arguing that young men are subjectively negotiating the discursive construction of Muslim identities. This negotiation engages with dynamic dissonances that are (re)constituting their remembering of the past and the living and doing of the present and their imagined futures.

Keywords
masculinity, millennial generation, Muslim young men, postcolonial, self-production

Introduction
The last few decades have witnessed the projection across the public sphere of media-led sensationalist images of Muslim young men as a major threat to the nation in terms of...
‘home-grown terrorists’ and ‘potential jihadists’ (West & Lloyd, 2017). A specific focus of this article is the attempted state containment alongside the accompanying closure of gendered possibilities of a generation of millennial (born between 1980 and 2000) Muslim young men, and their response in terms of narratives of emerging masculine identities and subjectivities. An epistemological assumption of these pervasive narratives appears to be that religion is the dominant and exclusive social category that shapes their behaviour (Panjwani, 2017). The article provides an insight into young Muslim men’s experience of state containment and how this containment is articulated through processes of (de)gendering and the projection of ‘Othered’ masculinities. More specifically, it explores their experiences in the context of racialized borders through representations of urban space and the Muslim family. The discussion presented here emerges from critical ethnographic work that we have carried out with British-born young men of Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage located within the city of Birmingham over the last decade.

As Buckley’s (1997, p. 95) analysis of young Irish women in Britain suggests, any theoretical framework that seeks to locate Muslim young men in British society will be a complex one. This is because Muslim people in Britain/urban neighbourhoods of England stand at the intersection of many powerful political forces that contrast with each other across the stage of their bodies, their labour, their consumption and their sense of self. Nevertheless, as Buckley continues, the theoretical discourses that traditionally have been used to discuss identities of difference in Britain do not capture the complexity of their experiences. Such traditional discourses not only regulate knowledge and understandings, but they also institute the impossibilities of rethinking the cultural dynamics of this group of young men’s ways of looking at and being in the social world. In response, this article brings together two theoretically led frames – critical men’s studies and postcolonial analysis – in order to explore Muslim young men’s everyday lives. It is the tensions embedded within these disparate and expansive frames that facilitate an understanding of often contradictory and fragile identifications within these young men’s subjectivities. These identifications located within local (regional) postcolonial urban spaces are marked by fragmenting genders, plural sexualities, new ethnicities and fracturing classes, that in turn are embedded within a ‘bigger picture’ of globally-inflected socio-economic austerity, increasing inequalities, the diversity and/or fragmentation of racial/religious politics and accompanying processes of Islamophobia/re-racialization (Isakjee, 2016; Shain, 2017). Re-racialization here refers to the ways in which bodies that were once framed through a racialized code such as ethnicity become re-racialized through the application of religious codes (see Moosavi, 2015).

**Critical men’s studies and post-colonial analysis: Muslim millennial men’s emerging gendered identities and subjectivities**

A central feature of the state’s conceptual manufacturing of Muslim millennial men is the attempted institutional containment of them within the singular category of religion. Institutional containment is used here to refer to a reductive reification of religion often used in state policy responses, popular media and institutions, such as schools, that serves ideologically to marginalize other multiple categories of social and cultural
difference that are part of young Muslim men’s lives in the public sphere (Mac an Ghaill & Haywood, 2017). As a result, this containment has the effect of limiting the range of subject positions that can be occupied as a Muslim young man within public spaces. It is argued that such containment simultaneously operates through a wider societal re-categorizing of ethnic social groups into religious (Muslim) and gendered (Men) ones (Mac an Ghaill & Haywood, 2021; Shain, 2017). For Muslim millennial men, there is now an intensified global surveillance, local cultural pathologization and multiple forms of gendered positioning and racial exclusion of their social lives that operate within this re-categorization. A key issue here is the question of how does a socially constructed phenomenon, such as religion, become fixed as an apparently stable unitary category? Deploying certain features of a critical men’s studies analysis and postcolonial theory, we suggest that state institutions currently attempt to administer, regulate and reify unstable social categories, such as religion, ethnicity, gender and sexuality (see Mirza & Joseph, 2013), through processes of (de)gendering and the projection of ‘othered’ masculinities.

In earlier studies, we drew upon postcolonial critiques of Connell’s (2005) seminal work on hegemonic masculinity and complex power, in exploring Muslim young men’s performing ethno-religious and class-based masculinities (as ‘the enemy within’) in relation to an earlier generation of their fathers and grandfathers (as ‘racial outsiders’) (Haywood & Mac an Ghaill, 2012). In seeking their negotiated meanings attached to being Muslim men, we found their ambivalence towards generationally specific ways of being Muslim, based upon culturally infused religious identities and their rejection of masculinities underpinned by violence; hence identifications have involved reconfiguring the meaning of ‘Muslim’ (Mac an Ghaill & Haywood, 2014). A major limitation of much theorizing of young men’s relation to British society (as well as theorizing young Muslims’ identity formation simply in terms of responding to Islamophobia) is that dominant conventional notions about national/religious/ethnic identification/dis-identification and inclusion/exclusion appear as simple one-dimensional products of young men’s ethno-religious contexts (see Allen, 2020; Sayyid & Vakil, 2010). What becomes of central importance is to explore the constitutive elements of Muslim millennial men’s identity work, in relation to emerging gendered selves, identities and subjectivities, that are played out within the micro-geographies of specific spaces and places. To do this, through a synthesis of critical men’s studies and postcolonial theorizing, the concept of ‘Othering’ is deployed to understand how religion becomes a key limiting template for their subjectivities.

Spivak (1985), drawing upon Lacan, uses Othering to explain how the Colonizer (The Other) produces its subjects (others) in order to ensure its epistemic primacy. Importantly, in the process of Othering, there is a dialogical dependency between the Other and the other, with the Other (in Spivak’s work the ‘Empire’) making itself through the subjectification of the other (‘Native’). In a similar way, critical men’s studies provide extensive accounts of how men sustain their privilege and status through the ‘Othering’ of men and women (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Diefendorf & Bridges, 2020; Hearn, 2018). In the context of masculinity, such studies have argued that Othering occurs by men using homophobic and/or feminizing discourses and practices against other men. Using both a critical men’s studies and postcolonial perspective, it appears that Muslim young men are
caught up as the ‘oppositional other’ in the British/English reinvention of the white population’s collective national(ist) identity (Phoenix, 2019). Importantly, this Othering takes on a distinctive character.

Said’s (1978, p. 2) work on Orientalism, which can be understood as ‘a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles’, has been a major critical influence. The discourse assumes and projects a sense of the fundamental difference between a Western occidental ‘us’ and an Eastern, Asiatic oriental ‘them’. There is a long (imperial/neo-imperial) history of images of racialized and gender/sexual social groups, who are projected across state governance, policy making and (empiricist) research as a major problem. Hesse (2000, pp. 11–12) refers to the legacy of imperial themes and assumptions of governance as informing the more recent ‘problematic of British race relations’. Kalra (2009, p. 114), drawing upon Hesse’s analysis, claims that academic work on British Asian masculinities continues to be located within this discourse with ‘the temporal framing of the British race relations narrative in terms of a post-1945 start’. From a postcolonial perspective, Kalra (2009, p. 123) asks:

Finally, the question of racialized minority and masculinity needs to be explored in terms of the theoretical terrain that has emerged in the writings of theorists such as Judith Butler and Judith Halberstam in order to question whether, in fact, it is possible to talk in terms of Muslim masculinities, given the abject nature of the signifier Muslim in social and political discourse. (see also Isakjee, 2016)

Alongside a dominant public representation of Muslim young men as ‘home-grown’ potential jihadists, they are also projected as anti-modern citizens (Isakjee, 2016). This form of re-racialization is most often spoken through the categories of gender and sexuality, with political and media discourses suggesting that they adhere to a traditional regressive form of patriarchy and that they are intrinsically homophobic (Puar, 2007). For example, the emergence of Asian grooming gangs is represented as, ‘symptomatic of the deviance of Muslim masculinities and the problematic patriarchy allegedly induced and indulged by Islam’ (Tufail & Poynting, 2016, p. 90). Deploying a critical men’s studies approach enables us to explore the gendering and sexual politics of these young men. Implicit within the conventional image of them is an appeal to earlier sex role theory (see Stoller, 1968). In its current application, Muslim young men through religious-based socialization are seen as conditioned into reactionary roles of behavior, with the assumption that these ahistorical essences are quantifiable and measurable. Ironically, an earlier representation working within this frame that carried an Orientalist legacy perceived South Asian young men as effeminate (having too little masculinity), while currently, officially ‘reclassified’ as Muslim, they are projected as potential jihadists (having too much masculinity) (Kalra, 2009).

In examining the generationally specific nature of young Muslim masculinities, we use the theoretical frames outlined above, to explore the young men’s identities and subjectivities within the state’s imagined ‘no-go’ spaces of the ethno-religious neighbourhood and the ‘Muslim family’.
Methodology: Young men’s narratives and epistemological reflexivity

Whilst we recognize the diversity of the Muslim community (Dunne et al., 2020), this article is based upon research with Birmingham-born millennial young men of Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage, aged 18–25. Drawing upon a research project located within the city of Birmingham occurring during 2019, we recorded the experiences of 20 Bangladeshi (8) and Pakistani (12) working-class young men. This builds upon research conducted in the same city during 2016–17, when we recorded the experiences of 16 Bangladeshi (5) and Pakistani (11) working-class young men. In this article, we select a range of the young men’s narratives to illustrate the major themes and argument being presented. The majority of the young men attended further education colleges and higher education. The research groups contained a mix of Bangladeshi and Pakistani young men, who shared friendships and were part of a broader social community. Furthermore, although they were diverse individuals, in terms of ethnicity, age, academic achievement, past experience and social status with different current experiences of being in education, work/training or unemployed, they held a shared critical reflexivity about ethnic majority assumptions of Muslim identities. Our earlier work with a younger generation of British-born men of Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage, in Newcastle, London and Birmingham, makes clear their geographically-specific local experiences of growing up in a rapidly changing Britain. In other words, the young men in this Birmingham-based study inhabit specific lifestyles and temporal/spatial masculinities within a context of diverse social trajectories amid a changing multi-generational Muslim diaspora in Britain.

We situate the current specificity of our research participants’ experiences within an epistemological frame, in which we understand the cultural representation of British Muslim young men as an effect of a specific historical legacy of a British ethno-racial regime’s technology of looking (Hickman, 2005; Said, 1978). In Bhabha’s (1983, pp. 203–204) work on colonial discourse, he argues that: ‘colonial power produces the colonized as a fixed reality which is at once an “other” and yet entirely knowable and visible’; hence, ‘in order to conceive of the colonial subject as an effect of power that is productive – disciplinary and “pleasurable” – one has to see the surveillance of colonial power as functioning in relation to the regime of the scopic drive’. Crucially, we see the institutional context as central to this process. In terms of the response to their positioning and self-positioning, our research set out to enable the research participants to inhabit an alternative representational space to dominant frames, providing insightful narratives about the complexity of their gendered subject positions as a generationally-specific cohort across public and private spaces. By recognizing that qualitative accounts are mutually constructed, it is possible to identify narratives that serve to unsettle pervasive research intelligibility. In so doing, a collective reflexivity and an accompanying conceptual reconfiguration of dominant epistemologies are accomplished. This reconfiguration facilitates challenging how state, media and academic discourses produce ways of knowing Muslim young men, which they illustrate in this research; thus, attempting to ensure it does not re-inscribe them as a social problem for the state.

Using qualitative research committed us as researchers to:
understanding the lived experience of the participant/interlocutor by asking about and listening closely to the beliefs, the values, the material conditions and structural forces that underwrite the socially patterned behaviors of all human beings, along with the meanings people attach to these conditions and forces. (Hockey & Forsey, 2012, p. 83)

The key aim of the research design was to use a range of methods to inform the development of a framework that enabled us to understand the meaning of emerging gendered identities and subjectivities among a millennial generation of Muslim men in contemporary Britain. Like Munt (2008, p. 15), we have sought to analyse the context of their securing of these intricate subjectivities and identities ‘as they have formed historically within composite cultural narratives lodged in representation’. As indicated above, we situated our research participants’ experiences within an epistemological frame in which we understand the cultural representation of British young Muslim men as an effect of a specific historical legacy of a British ethno-racial regime’s technology of looking. This produced a complex process in carrying out the research. For example, we needed to go beyond any simple providing of ‘a space’ or ‘giving a voice’ to the young men. Rather, we were actively involved in critically listening to the young men as they produced what they claimed were self-authorized accounts of their lives. The participants and we operated with a high degree of reflexivity. For us, as researchers, this enabled us to begin to understand that their meanings were not fixed but in a process of being developed as part of their emerging subjectivities and identities within the context of the local neighbourhood.

It is reported that 21% (approximately 232,000 people) of the population resident in Birmingham identified as Muslim (Birmingham City Council, 2013) compared to 4.8% in the UK population (Office for National Statistics, 2012). This is the highest number of Muslims for a local authority in the UK. Furthermore, in terms of ethnicity, the electoral ward of Birmingham records 144,627 (13.5%) Pakistani and 32,532 (3%) Bangladeshi within these communities. Within this context, such communities are highly diverse. However, this qualitative study does not seek inductive validity by suggesting that the participants represent the experiences of the broader Muslim male population of the area or the general population. As Crouch and McKenzie (2006, p. 493) argue:

Rather than being systematically selected instances of specific categories of attitudes and responses, here respondents embody and represent meaningful experience-structure links. Put differently, our respondents are ‘cases’, or instances of states, rather than (just) individuals who are bearers of certain designated properties (or ‘variables’).

As Boedeltje (2011) suggests, methodologically facilitating an alternative representative space is not simply about listening to a range of voices, but also about where those voices are spoken. Access to the data collection was greatly enabled by our being known for our social commitment to the local area, working with families in the local community. During work with young people in the local area, they introduced us to other young people and this subsequently led to further snowballing of other friends, family and community representatives (Patton, 1990). The researchers’ background and living within the area contributed to a collapsing and sometimes reversal of an assumed power dynamics that are often allied to generation, ‘race’/ethnicity and gender. Access to these young men was
often a result of a shared affinity and historical ties to the area that would secure the support of key gatekeepers, with different social groups and within different activities (Heath et al., 2007). In short, the research position is not given through an ascribed understanding of researcher identity, rather research positionality was a process that was constantly re-negotiated and dependent on the wider context of producing and co-producing situated knowledges (Rose, 1997).

Much of the material presented here was collected from observations, group interviews, informal conversations and recorded in-depth, focused interviews (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000). As indicated above, we situated our research participants’ experiences within an epistemological frame in which we understand the cultural representation of British young Muslim men as an effect of a specific historical legacy of a British ethno-racial regime’s technology of looking. Group and individual interviews provided the framework through which to explore a range of critical incidents experienced by the young men. The group interviews were carried out and they not only provided a space for multiple and often contradictory voices but also resonated with a qualitative spirit of capturing ‘ambivalence, ambiguity, and openness’ (Biehl & Locke, 2010, p. 321). These interviews lasted around 45 to 90 minutes and provided more in-depth insights into growing up, family, schooling, academic success, social/leisure life and the local community. The interviews enabled the young men to discuss a number of themes that included schooling, employment, intimacy and relationships. The constant analytical dialogue with the young people, the data and between ourselves facilitated an understanding of the ways in which (de)gendering was being experienced. We now explore this process in more detail in the next sections by focusing on two other themes that were generated within the research process: racialized borders and symbolic urban space and the Muslim family.

Racialized borders, local British neighbourhood masculinities and cultural belonging

Our understanding of the concept border is informed by a wide range of theoretical work developed in Northern Ireland over the last few decades, which has included postcolonial and gender theorising. A major theme of this work is multi-located young people’s negotiation of border identity formations that are enabling a reworking of traditionally ascribed oppositional-based positions and the mobilisation of diverse generationally-specific subjectivities (Cash, 2017; Liston & Deighan, 2019; McCall, 2021). More specifically, in addressing the interplay between the religious and gender dynamics of the public reconfiguration of South Asian ethnicity to religious identities across racialized borders, feminist and postcolonial theorists have provided a sophisticated map of British Muslim young women in late modernity (Anthias & Yuval-Davies, 1993; Mirza & Joseph, 2013). There is a need to expand the concept of gender to include Muslim young men, as a spatially configured ethno-religious and gendered category. However, it is not self-evident what the gendering of Muslim young men means. Observing the young men’s negotiation of contemporary racialized borders discursively imposed upon inner-city neighbourhoods and reading through their narratives in our research enabled us to understand the effects of state containment also as a process of (de)gendering. For
example, they suggested that teachers in operating with a single category of religion in relation to them had specific (de)gendering effects. For the young men, state and institutional discourses of dualistic notions of masculine risk and danger are experienced as an institutionally driven form of emasculation; here, they recall memories of teachers in their primary school systematically invoking the category being a good Muslim rather than a good boy, the usual reference for all other male pupils who had achieved highly in classroom work.

Azam: It was funny at primary [school], the Muslim kids knew that teachers wouldn’t ever say, a ‘good boy’ or ‘a very good boy’, if you did good at reading or writing. It was weird, it was like if you’re a Muslim you’re not really a boy, like you’re invisible. Why did they do that?

Sajid: You’re right. I think even in secondary [school], they talk about men role models, in sport and high jobs, so you become a successful man. But not for Muslim boys. I don’t know, it’s confusing, very confusing. It’s like they must think, if we say anything about growing up, you know to get a good job, or be a good father, that doesn’t apply to Muslims, not really. Where do they get this from?

Abdul: Because we’re just Muslims, that’s it.

(Group interview – first research project)

What is interesting in the above account is that the reification of the static categories of religion not only folds gender into the category of Muslim but also the generational category of childhood. As the young men point out, they were neither affirmed through their gender nor were they discursively located as children. Instead, the young men could only gain epistemic legitimacy through their designation as Muslim. This reductionism is striking, given that schools routinely depend upon an elision of the categories of pupil/child in order to deliver an effective pedagogy (Haywood, 2008). We have seen in highly populated Muslim schools in Birmingham, sex and relationship education being commended by the national regulatory office, Ofsted, for its promotion of ‘British values’ (Mac an Ghaill & Haywood, 2021). This understanding of (de)gendering positions Muslim men and children as outside British borders of civic responsibility, a discursive positioning of being ‘out of place’. More specifically, the major international media claim is that Birmingham, which has been identified as the Jihadi capital of Europe, is failing in its governance of the Muslim community, resulting in a legacy of young men who as an increasingly visible cohort of this suspect community are seen as both highly vulnerable and a major threat to society, possessing an anti-British ethnicity and anti-modern masculinity (Shackle, 2017).

Simultaneously to the operation of state and institutional containment, the redrawing of late modern urban representational borders, which the state reads as evidence of religious self-segregation, serves to write out the question of gender and more specifically, masculinity. Isakjee (2016, p. 1337) provides a sophisticated framework, drawing upon sociological and geographical theories of belonging by bringing together issues of scale and spatiality, suggesting that ‘young Muslim male identities are characterized by a dissonance between the emotional place-belongingness that evokes for them a sense of inclusion and the politics of belonging that marks out their exclusion’. Similarly, we found there was a
The young men highlight how place becomes coded as a ‘no-go’ space of hard physical borders and the increasing complexity of imagined borders has imposed racially intensified patterns of stratification. At the same moment, for Muslim young men, the war on terror’s rhetorical projection of them as the ‘global bad boys’ appears to make invisible an unreported post-Brexit assertive English nationalism that involves a forging of a renewed British identity, and a state militarized and securitized masculinity. Broader policy initiatives, such as the Prevent programme, launched in 2003, as part of a wider counter-terrorism strategy (HM Government, 2011), with its shift from a logic of multiculturalism to securitization, underpinned by an assumption that multicultural policy has failed, are finely portrayed by Virdee and McGeever (2018), in what they refer to as the racializing nationalism in populist Britain. In so doing, they provide a conjunctural analysis of the financial and political crisis during the Brexit period with a central feature emerging of a shifting political grammar that was increasingly racialized, while impacting upon specific communities. For example, within a British context, with the normalization of the populist Far Right that saw the dovetailing of anti-European Union immigration and Islamophobia, the last few decades’ dominant national populist political discourses of anti-immigration and taking back control (of borders) produced a monocultural version of Britain/England and a narrow version of Britishness/Englishness (see Miah, 2018; Ragazzi, 2016; Valluvan, 2019). Furthermore, young men’s experience of being ‘other’ is occurring at a significant moment that sees an accompanied re-racialization of Muslims that has emerged within a state-led racially hostile environment.

More specifically, this is involving the two overlapping (post-Brexit) narratives of Islamophobia and anti-EU immigration media discourses being made highly visible in the increased spike in hate crimes that the young men expected to increase in the future (Versi, 2016). In 2020, 50% (3089) of all hate crime officially recorded was against Muslims. Within 2020 itself, the increase in religious hate crime more than doubled between April 2020 and July 2020 (Home Office, 2020). Although statistics on hatred towards particular characteristics such as age and gender are collected by a number of police force across the UK, they tend not to form part of the Government’s recent statistical bulletins in this area. However, research by Walters and Krasodomski-Jones (2018) suggests that around 70.8% of victims of racial hate crime and 69.9% of victims of religious hate crime were men. The impact of Brexit is part of a long history of South Asian young men experiencing a sense of border control that serves to exclude them from
public spaces within British cities (Garbaye, 2019). A major effect over the last few years of establishing a securitized regime marked by constant legislation, over-policing and regulation involving ascribed values, reviled violent bodies and designated locations has been to circumscribe the public spaces within which Muslim young men can enact and perform masculinities in public spheres. Diasporian groups in developing their identities adopt an expanding conceptual understanding of such terms as home, belonging, desire and exclusion that are embedded in local places marked by gender-inflected, generational dissonance and psychic and emotional ambivalence. Here, such ambivalence was marked by the hard realism of the enactment of state containment operating through the category of religion of the Muslim community; as young men suggested above, the discursive ‘war on terror’ translated in their everyday lives as a war on Muslim young men.

In contrast to state and media projected manufactured images of the Muslim marked by anti-British ethnicity that officially defines Muslim millennials through different forms of (de)gendering, we found that the young men lived out their everyday lives at a local level with an intense and intimate attachment to their neighbourhoods in which local British masculine identities and subjectivities were being produced. The young men discussed how earlier generations of immigrants, which included their fathers and grandfathers, had built and serviced the modern urban infrastructure, which produced specific masculine industrial work-focused subjectivities of hard graft, night shifts, dangerous work and ethnic survival. For example:

Abdul: They say we fed everyone [in Birmingham] in the restaurants and shops. Basically, immigrants did all the tough bad work the locals didn’t want to do.  
Munif: And this affected the way they saw things, life was really tough, so they had to prepare us for this or to escape it through education.  
Mahir: Remember talking to the older men, they had to be tough when they first came here, their work was really hard but also all the racism and having to protect the places they lived in and worked in.

(Group discussion – first research project)

The above discussion highlights how the sons and grandsons of migrants build on earlier gendered biographies to develop generationally-specific place-based narratives growing up in regenerating global metropolitan cities, which at the same time within neoliberal conditions includes increasing imposed national stratification patterns inflected by austerity-based class and racial effects (Wojnicka & Pustulka, 2019). The young men’s talk alerts us to a historical amnesia about the positioning of South Asian communities prior to 9/11 and 7/7. These major public events have tended to write out complex narratives of the migration and settlement trajectories of cohorts of the global Muslim diaspora that is a nationally and ethnically highly diverse population, geographically located within different regions of Britain. Alongside this, their British-born children and grandchildren continue to be publicly represented as undifferentiated from an earlier generation of immigrants. This homogenization of the Muslim community distorts both an understanding of Muslim men’s (and women’s) histories of movement from their countries of origin with which the British state was involved as a colonial power and the longstanding contribution of generations of Muslim men (and women) to the building of modern Britain. As indicated above, we situated our research participants’ experiences within an
epistemological frame in which we understand the cultural representation of British young Muslim men as an effect of a specific historical legacy of a British ethno-racial regime’s technology of looking.

The young men in this research describe an older generation whose masculine status and personal self-worth were closely aligned to a working-class ethos and an entrepreneurialism that was underpinned by a sense of care for their community. The discussion also talks of a ‘toughness’, depicting a masculinity forged through racial/ethnic intolerance rather than a specific form of Islamophobia. However, there is an interesting similarity with white British men’s self-sacrifice for their family by doing dangerous and dirty work (Pattinson, 2016; Tosh, 2005). At the same time, within this group of millennial Muslim men, there was a recognition of how the cost to their fathers’ and their grandfathers’ wellbeing spoke to a form of altruistic toughness where “real men” are those who give more than they take, they serve others. Real men are generous even to a fault’ (Gilmore, 1990, p. 229). In Isakjee’s (2016) research, among the young men there was a sense of collective masculine pride and belonging in the local neighbourhood and an expansion of the meaning of home beyond the privacy of the domestic sphere to include places, spaces and people across the neighbourhood that resonated with the young men in our study, illustrated in the following discussion.

Rashid: Our parents, our fathers have worked very hard to make this a great business city. Like my grandfather had little schooling but he’s like a genius with the way he’s built up the family business. None of us in our family could do it.

Khalid: And people come from across the world, it’s a good place to be.

(Group interview – first research project)

It is important to note the warmth and personal intimacy that underpinned the young men’s talk about place. Mohammad (2013) in a study of youthful British Pakistani Muslim women situated in the city of Birmingham explores their narratives of what she refers to as ‘the performance of gendered, Muslim public spatialities’ (p. 1802). She uses the latter term ‘to refer to the spatial practices and personal geographies of the body and territory’ (2013, p. 1802). Similarly, here the young men were conscious of the intertwining of spatial (labour market) practices, personal geographies of the body and the performance of public masculinities in which a moral economy operated that served severely to limit bodily movement, careers and hence futures that were open to them. Thus, there were highly complex feelings among different groups of young men about the transition from home to employment. Employment was a multi-layered concept for the young men. For example, as a millennial generation of Muslims, employment opened up choices around social mobility in racially structured labour markets. Furthermore, critical men’s studies enabled us to shift our research focus beyond questions about high levels of unemployment and racial barriers to explore alternative forms of gendering focusing on filial responsibility, cultural belonging and home that they were in the process of developing as central to their emerging subjectivities and identities.

Alongside this, some socially mobile young men, who were at university, spoke of an ambivalence towards their local neighbourhood in which they had grown up, that while sharing the general pride in the area referred to above, they were questioned by friends
whether their social mobility in status and spatial terms of ‘getting on’ meant ‘getting out’. For some, there was an emphasis on an entrepreneurial masculinity and the need for an international labour market to fulfil their career ambitions; others were in the process of developing ‘cosmopolitan masculinities’ in hi-tech digital industries, fashion, music and academic careers beyond the spatial constraints associated with the local places with which they were familiar. However, for all the young men their understanding of home and family was linked to a traditional cultural understanding of masculinity, meaning that in the future they would continue to carry out filial responsibility for their extended families, which is explored further in the next section.

The Muslim family, the ‘old’ patriarchal father and interpersonal relations – emerging Muslim millennial males

This article, in seeking critically to explore young Muslim men’s lives as a generationally-specific gendered category, may unintentionally serve to re-inscribe the current re-racialization of Muslim young men that is spoken through gender and sexuality. The media-led projection of the ‘Muslim grooming gang’ with reference to the child sexual abuse that occurred within Rotherham in South Yorkshire and Rochdale in Greater Manchester has sensationally heightened such representations (Cockbain, 2013). Importantly, for the young men, while many professionals may tend not to operate with the dominant popularist image of them as a potential terrorist threat to the nation, many of them seem to assume that they possess a regressive, hyper-patriarchal, traditional religious identity. This form of racialization is based on a psychological model of atavistic identity that is assumed simply to emerge out of these young men’s bodies. Such reductionist models, with an accompanying closure of gendered possibilities and the range of masculinities that are subsequently available to these young men, serve to contain young men by locating them outside history, society and culture and thus engagement within the dynamics of late modern public spheres across civil society and institutional life. More specifically, containment operates by writing out young men’s interpersonal social relations addressing questions of emotional connectivity, social bonds and affective intimacies within the context of the family and a wider network of friends and neighbours – a space that enables them to display young caring masculinities. Critical men’s studies allowed us to challenge the dominant narratives of containment that operated by writing out young Muslim men’s interpersonal social relations. In turn, this provided a space for us to observe and listen to the young men in discussion about their families, fathers and friends to portray the emerging gendered positions they are in the process of developing, including caring masculinities.

Britton (2019) highlights the significance of exploring this under-researched area of men caring as a useful way to critique dominant narratives that position men as lacking intimacies of care. Our own research resonates with Britton’s main findings with a millennial generation of Muslim young men recalling memories of personal family stories of warmth and support. In many ways, their accounts contested dominant public narratives about their lives and that of their fathers and grandfathers. The young men in our research helped us to understand how they were experiencing a framing of their identities as homogeneous and fixed: from an ascribed image as law-abiding citizens (their
grandfathers and fathers) to the current image of ‘dangerous brown men’ (as grandsons and sons) (Bhattacharrya, 2008), who embody an anti-British ethnicity (Shain, 2017).

Majed: Stereotypes are never simple, even though [South] Asian men in the past had a more positive image than those for us now, they were still seen as all the same.

Ali: In the past it was mainly young blacks were seen as a threat, now it’s us. But it’s the same approach, blaming the whole community if there’s one bad person and saying it’s because they’re black or Muslim. That would never happen to a white person, they’re seen as individuals.

(Individual interviews – second research project)

Shifting state definitions of South Asian/Muslim young masculinities have been visibly exhibited and invoked at specific ‘crisis cultural moments’ through the media and state deployment of the historically-based tropes of the South Asian/Muslim extended family and the South Asian/Muslim patriarchal father. Within a contemporary context, a millennial generation of Muslim men was aware that society with its mandate of intense monitoring and surveillance of their families and community has shifted in a long war on inner-city bad boys from a projected criminalized 1970s ‘generation of black muggers’ with ‘out of control families’, who displayed ‘a threatening masculinity’, to ‘an assumed military’ threat of a projected ‘current generation of British Muslim boy jihadists’, who are seen to be a generation of sons in ‘conflict with overly oppressive patriarchal fathers’. Hence, government requests for Muslim parents to report their children for assumed signs of radicalization (Weaver, 2015). Some Muslim young men perceived this reductionist image of the old patriarchal father as a generalized distortion of their relationships with their fathers that for them would be a familial generational pattern for a section of sons among all social groups. Others felt that for the children of all diasporian groups, there might be tensions within a context of rapid social and cultural changes. The young men described through a diverse range of intimate, nuanced and complex narratives that several contingent variables informed their interactions with their fathers and most notably the contextual influence of their age and experience. They reflected on, as they grew older, how they developed a more appreciative understanding of what their fathers had experienced in bringing them up. They were also insightful about the changing intergenerational patterns of social and emotional familial relations of intimacy and care and how this played out between rapidly shifting generational meanings of being a father and a son.

Farooq: At uni. White middle-class guys would talk about hating their parents and couldn’t wait to get away from them, no one focuses on this. The white working-class guys like our mates were more relaxed about their fathers. For Muslim families, whether your parents are educated, areas they’re living in, the class you come from, just like all other people, influence how fathers and sons get on.

Javed: Lots of Muslim fathers used to combine traditional religious, cultural rules that people who aren’t Muslim concentrate on and lots of care and support and love for the family, that no-one comments on. Birmingham
has one of the biggest Muslim charities, which reflects a general family attitude we have to look after other people outside the family.

(Individual interviews – second research project)

Observing the young men’s everyday interactions serves to question dominant containing discourses of gendered closure outlined above that circumscribed their lives. Rather than positioning the Muslim family as a central repository of the radicalization of young men as sons and thus dangerous units of masculinity-making within the context of securitization, Muslim young men might be understood as located within a wider concept of diasporian families, in which the dynamics and shifting meanings of everyday life are performed in diverse ways by a younger generation of sons (and daughters). For some, their identity-making appears to be mediating and seeking a synthesis between values of tradition and late modernity and the accompanying reconfiguration of gender relations, while for others there is a rethinking of the conceptualization of the tradition/modernity dualism beyond the dominant model.

As Ranasinha (2009, p. 302) notes: the father–son narrative is a ‘dominant trope’ in diasporic writing. She critically engages with Hanif Kureishi’s work, describing it as an ‘intervention in redefining configurations of racialized masculinity’ (p. 297). Postcolonial playwrights and novelists, such as Kureishi, have provided significant insights into the social and psychoanalytic generational tensions between fathers and sons that were evident among the young men in our research. However, in discussions with them what emerged as of central significance was the question of filial responsibility. Earlier in the article, we referred to young men in securing masculine subjectivities inhabiting diverse trajectories; however, whatever the masculine styles that they were inhabiting, fathers were central figures with the young men, suggesting a range of responses in thinking through how to translate family traditions and responsibilities of being a son within contemporary conditions, including a changing gender order and most significantly the changing gender expectations of their university-educated sisters. While some young men held onto or were remaking a more traditional perspective, others welcomed the opportunity to develop masculine subject positions that involved a filial responsibility shaped by a more interactive, caring, familial masculinity.

Mahir: In our generation you can see a lot more girls than boys being successful in school and getting into uni, so I suppose marriage and looking after the kids will be different for us. I think it will be a good thing, sharing things more and all the caring and emotional stuff will have to be shared.

(Individual interview – first research project)

Mahir suggests a shift towards a late modern reflexive generation of young men (and women), who are developing cosmopolitan genders and sexualities. More specifically, there were reflexive discussions marked by complexities, contradictions and emotional investments among the different developing trajectories that were linked to the negotiation of the performance of diverse mobile/fluid masculinities.

Significantly, in relation to the remaking of young Muslim masculinities in local urban neighbourhoods, such as Birmingham, in contrast to the work-focused production of their fathers’ generation of masculinity (working with the body), from a consumer-focus (working on the body) these young men spoke of multiple platforms, sites and
resources – local and global – that enabled a re-imagining of young masculine subjectivities. These were assembled within local neighbourhood South Asian/Muslim youth leisure spaces, including digital communication technologies making available diverse visual representations. It seemed a defining feature of their gendered generational difference and projected forms of masculine validation, as a millennial generation of Muslim men, was the linking of techniques of the body and corporeal performance within the context of intense state surveillance and multiple socio-economic exclusions. Furthermore, in contrast to their fathers’ generation and the diasporic annual return to the homeland (Pakistan/Bangladesh) that formed part of filial responsibility, this millennial generation of men in their everyday practices are actively engaging in transnational connections across the global Muslim world. In so doing, they enter into cosmopolitan spheres in which multiple ethnicities, nationalities, genders and sexualities are being enacted and performed that are opening up further possibilities in reconfiguring sex/gender relations.

Raqib: Now for our generation even young kids at primary school, they’re getting into different styles and they will experiment with lots of different styles as they grow up, as there are a lot more images online of young Muslim men.

Kahif: The older generation think young people are losing their culture but I think most we know aren’t, they’re just doing culture differently and social media is really important in making connections across the Muslim world our grandparents would never have been able to.

(Group discussion – second research project)

Mohammad (2013, p. 1809) comments on one of her interviewees, a young Muslim woman, Saima from Birmingham, describing her local neighbourhood, Small Heath, stating that: ‘Saima presents here a community that closely resembles what Tonnies describes as “gemeinschaft”, a community based on organic social ties forged over many years’ (Wirth, 1927). The young men in our research shared a similar location and were involved in similar everyday interactions. Their close-knit male peer interpersonal relationships were culturally produced and embedded within specific local spaces, such as neighbourhood streets, schools, mosques and madrassas, cafes, gyms and snooker halls. Furthermore, the collective cultural production of young masculinities was marked by values of high trust, care, commitment and respect.

Wasim: We’ve all grown up together and it gives you a special bond. Like we can discuss anything with each other, any problems you got there is always someone there for you. There’s full trust between us, we’d always look out for each other.

(Individual interview – second research project)

This caring masculinity was also extended by some of the young men to take responsibility for their older white neighbours, for whom they carried out a range of supportive activities in addressing their everyday needs. These hidden social relations of care provide public spaces for these young men to perform caring masculinities by extending their filial responsibilities to a surrogate family of white elderly neighbours often abandoned by their own sons and daughters.
Conclusion

Currently, representations of Muslim men can be captured by Razack’s (2008, p. 16) claim that ‘Considered irredeemably fanatical, irrational and thus dangerous, Muslim men are also positioned as deeply misogynist patriarchs who have not progressed into the age of gender equality, and who indeed cannot.’ By combining insights from both critical men’s studies and postcolonial theories, this article highlights the ‘Othering’ of masculinities. We have shown that this ‘Othering’, articulated through privileging particular representations of Muslim men, publicly attempts to contain their subjectivities through the ascription of punitive social and cultural categories. This article reports that, in response, Muslim young men are developing an alternative representational space within which to explore (dis)identifications with themselves, their peers and their wider community. Importantly, the administration, regulation and reification of such (dis)identifications are developed across the micro-geographies of the interrelated social and discursive practices of state institutional spaces. Broad shifting dominant representations of South Asian/Muslim young men projected across the state, media and popular culture are mediated within public institutions, alongside specific institutionally produced internal representations. This has included a diverse range of cultural archetypes within the changing social formations of early and late modernity – the age of global migration. There is a long history of British institutions employing ‘containing’ categories that frame the possibilities of knowing and understanding South Asian/Muslim young men.

Situating more recent developments within this history of the state governance and regulation of South Asian migration and settlement in Britain highlights the continuities and (gendered) generational specificities of what often appears as a fundamental shift in British political and media discourses. Within these generational specificities, South Asian young men are currently being reconfigured within the legacy of the overarching conceptual frame of the Muslim Question. Iconic representational moments involving the disturbances in Northern towns in 2001, the 9/11 attacks, the 7/7 bombings and events such as the murder of Lee Rigby and London Bridge attacks are seen as generating central policy changes that have been critical in shaping, and as a response to, a shifting dominant public image of South Asian young men from an ascribed image as law-abiding citizens to the current image of Muslim young dangerous brown men (Bhattacharrya, 2008), who are a threat to the British nation (Shain, 2017). Simultaneously, these events were also of critical significance in raising the (ethno-religious) self-consciousness of the younger generation. For example, we explored above young men’s negotiation of contemporary racialized borders discursively imposed upon inner-city neighbourhoods. Hence, at a policy and theoretical level, a key discursive shift has emerged with the projection of the category religion displacing the category ethnicity as the primary marker of Muslims’ public identity. In turn, this has been accompanied by the re-racialization of the Muslim community and the projection of the ‘Muslim fundamentalist’ that is currently being played out within post-Brexit conditions with the emergence of an ascendant racializing nationalism in populist Britain (Carswell, 2019; Panjwani, 2017; Virdee & McGeever, 2018).

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