Those Muslim Women are At It Again!

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What is it about Muslim students and the media? If it's not one scandal it's another. Over the past decade alleged militant Islamist recruitment on campus has dominated reporting of Muslim students' experiences and framed discussions about them in terms of crisis and scandal. Pundits have regularly interrogated the reasons for this apparently growing trend: is it irrational reaction to stifling communities and family conflicts, an inherent drive to extremism, or a culturally hard-wired inability to successfully negotiate the challenges and opportunities of life in post-modern, post-industrial Britain?

However, excesses of an altogether different kind have recently captured media attention, with Sonia Malik (Q-News, 'Girls Just Wanna Have Fun', Issue 360) and Claire Coleman (The Daily Mail, 'Amazing double life a growing trend among Muslim girls', April) drawing attention to the scandal of the apparently rather louche behaviour of certain Muslim women students. Apparently this is a "growing trend" (DM), and many of its implied causes also look familiar, coalescing around one theme in particular - the idea that Muslims and Muslim families are somehow inadequate culturally, their identities somehow incoherent, and that there is a need to escape from Islam's parochialism. Generalised references to 'cultural traditions', 'growing up under lockdown', 'moral directives', and pressure to safeguard familial honour (QN), are built around a number of quotes from Muslim women students, and contribute to this fetishisation of their experiences and an exaggerated sense of 'moral panic'. By falling back on generalisations and focusing our gaze on one particular sub-section of Muslim women (and let's not forget what a loaded and contested term this is) we are in danger of giving way to popular stereotypes about the supposed backwardness of Muslim communities and cementing the scandal framing of Muslim students in popular reporting.

In proper context there's nothing novel or shocking about this representation of student life. 1980s sitcom The Young Ones had an interesting take on stereotypes and jokes about lazy, drunken, promiscuous students existing almost solely on diets of baked beans, alcohol, and illicit drugs and exploring new-found freedom away from parental controls. Its own twist to this caricature of scholarly turpitude combined anarchic slapstick with political references to life in Thatcher's Britain during the cold war, woven around four student variations on this stereotyped theme: hippy, punk, anarchist, ladies' man. Now, courtesy of these recent articles, it seems a fifth variation to this theme has arrived (and been invested with its own particular political significance), in the form of an apparently 'growing trend' towards 'double lives' among 'British Islam's' 'Bad Girls' at university.

Two issues need to be teased out here, one concerning evidence and the other representation. Without reference to numbers (estimated or actual) of women comprising the 'trend' both Malik and Coleman speak of, how can we be sure that it is indeed 'growing'? We're not in denial about what we see on campus – and, hey, we've been young ourselves once – but we do question the reliability of claims about a growing trend which appear to be based on the accounts of a relatively small number of women who presumably were interviewed precisely because they had something specific to offer on this topic.

Many students are bound to be attracted to new temptations when first away from home and may experiment in a variety of ways as part of their personal journeys, some preferring choices predicated around sobriety and spirituality and others trying anything once (at least). We must also remember that some students entering university may be more emotionally vulnerable than others. Their experiences in particular need to be handled sensitively, not turned into some tabloid spectacle.

Whilst there is empirical evidence to show that, like students of all backgrounds, some Muslim students 'rebel' at university (and there are different levels and definitions of rebellion), there is also evidence from both our respective corners of Britain (Liverpool and London) that suggests the opposite: many Muslim women who enter university just as curious and excited about their new found freedom as the next meet the challenges they face rather differently and find their sense of spiritual awareness and religiosity increases in the academy.

We can cite examples of many women who, in the face of parental anxieties about 'shame' and rebellion, have fought and argued their way into university. But we can also point towards women who have been actively encouraged into university by their parents - interestingly, fathers are often cited as influential here - because they want their daughters to 'stand on their own two feet' and 'secure good future husbands'. Emerging statistics show numbers of Muslim women in university outweighing Muslim men, and marrying ages among degree-educated Muslim women are rising. In this context, these experiences seem to us far more interesting and significant than a few cases of rabble-rousing and rebellion. They challenge the 'married as soon as possible' stereotypes and are functions of a wider emerging culture of university entry, expressed further by the choice of university and degree course and often bolstered with shades of 'keeping up with the Khans' attitude. Such women play an important role in paving the way for younger siblings and women in their families and communities.

Few in the mainstream media appear interested in such cases. Why would they be when it is so much easier to re-hash that age-old chestnut of being 'caught between two cultures'? Focusing only on those who 'step out of line' suggests a certain judgmentalism and cannot be justified as a responsible attempt to be mature and brave about challenges and problems facing our community. It can also be interpreted as suggestive of a certain shock at the apparent scandal of Muslim women students daring to defy the common stereotype of them as voiceless, oppressed, terminally obedient. As Muslim social scientists we face a particular dilemma in striking a balance between acknowledging, explaining, and understanding real social problems without 'selling out' through sensationalist voyeurism. When faced with a difference in perspective such as this, the likely outcome is that while one view becomes regarded as the 'apologist', the other (usually the one that highlights the sensational aspect), is welcomed as the 'authentic' 'native informant'.

We are also in difficulty of allowing limiting and polarised dichotomies between 'traditional women' (read 'backward, uneducated, religious) and 'modern women' (read 'Westernised, educated, secular) to remain unchallenged and thus obscure the potential for other, alternative avenues of expression and understanding. These binaries are not just restricted to media stereotypes, but, are deeply engrained misconceptions that extend into the academic working environment. They also have direct 'real'-world impacts, valorising and perpetuating a range of stereotypes about Muslim women and about university life.

Muslim women are often portrayed as the embodiment of religious and cultural manifestations. Amina Waddud's recent actions have thrust the position of Muslim women once again into the media spotlight for this very reason. But while we can argue that her stance has encouraged debate, the journalistic articles on Muslim women students and their 'double lives' merely invoke and reauthorise the same tired stereotypes that we've heard many times before.

The 50th anniversary of James Dean's death raises an interesting tension — that inter-generational conflict (for which he has become an emblematic figure) is not restricted to Muslims. What often differs is how this is framed and represented — often reduced to 'teen angst' or reified as exciting but ultimately harmless 'rebellion', or free-thinking hedonism for white British young people, or over-determined into a wider clash of essential cultures in the case of young people from Black and Minority Ethnic communities. There is also an interesting contrast between the representation of those young Muslim men and women who appear to 'rebel': many accounts scandalise the women and emphasise oriental sexuality, the breaking of taboos and crossing the 'colour divide' by going out with white boys, while men are often criminalized and overtly Islamicised.

These tensions interest us, for in itself there is actually nothing unusual in the clichéd figure of the undergraduate going off to university — the great market place of competing ideas — and doing things they'd not always like their parents to find out about, irrespective of the ethnicity of the students concerned. However, making spectacle of such experiences in the case of ethnicised minority young people (and particularly Muslims) serves a wider purpose in fixing their identities and 'culture' as problematic. The notion of a 'double life' buys into this logic, implying an inability to articulate a coherent identity that must mark these young people as pathological and almost schizophrenic. Representations of this split subjectivity are often most radicalised around the racialised mobile concurrency of past/'east'-present/'west' against which their supposed identity crises and conflict with family are played out, as they apparently slip between conflicting subject positions oriented relative to other essential caricatures ('traditional' parents, 'typical' students, for example).

It should come as no great surprise that Muslim young women away from home respond to their new found freedom in a plethora of ways. What is surprising is the way in which certain choices made by a small number are seen as being indicative of a 'growing trend' and framed in ways that often imply inadequacy, incoherence, and crisis in Muslim identities. We still face issues of racism and Islamophobia on campus, and have both had to deal with colleagues making condescending remarks about Muslim women who choose to wear hijab. We still see the media all too often framing representations of Muslim students by crisis. Like the idea of a little student madness, this has become a load of old hat. It is time to move on, and time for the media to focus on issues more relevant, weighty, and representative than scandal alone.