

# Ethnic minorities in britain



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### **Introduction**

(Mis)labelling identity signifiers bespeaks underlying histories of power structure(s). Indeed, however a case is made based on political, social, economic, cultural and ethnic grounds, an identity signifier remains central to sustain, if not to justify, existing power structures. Further, one specific identity signifier can be employed by contestant parties within a given discourse universe and even in exchange. As contestants struggle over meaning-making, moreover, exchanging (mis)labelled identity signifiers between and within groupings of contestant parties gain particular significance when (mis)labelling practice reaches out for outer frames of contested discourse, beyond a more usual practice of (mis)labelling contestants. ‘Islamophobia,’ if any, especially as contested within a U. K. context, is just such an instance of an active (mis)labelling practice in which ‘(Jewdo-Christian) Occident’ vs. ‘(Islamist) Orient’ as possible (mis)labelled parties to contest – exchange exact same (mis)labelled identity signifier i. e. ‘Islamophobic’ not only in order to frame parties to contest but for an appropriation of what ultimately defines frames of contest per se.

Indeed, much literature is dedicated to question the (mis)appropriateness of ‘Islamophobia’ as a labeller of ‘phobia’ generated, presumably, from an increasingly ‘visible’ presence of Islam / Muslims in the U. K. in recent years. 1, 2, 3 The case for / against Islamophobia, depending on which party holds argument, is, in fact, made blurry given the ambiguity of what constitutes a Muslim identity in the first place. 4 Considering potentially multiple identities of U. K. Muslims 5, 6, contestation between and within concerned parties

holds a fluid ground more so based on or as a result of fluidity of what makes up 'Islamophobia'. This paper examines multilayered manipulations of Islamophobia as contested within a U. K context. The argument, first, discusses literature on race relations and immigration policies, more emphasis being laid on policies pertaining to Commonwealth subjects in Indian Subcontinent. An examination follows of how race-based (addressing ethnicity, assimilation and multiculturalism issues) as opposed to faith-based (addressing religious practices, rights, and interfaith relations) protections have much influenced and/or mixed up contestations over Islam, Muslims and, most importantly, Islamophobia, if any, within a U. K. context. Finally, Islamophobia is placed in a wider European context in which contestation over Islamophobia as such is connected to Continental debates on modern nation-states and multiculturalisms.

### **Race, race relations and immigration policies**

Historically, Britain has received waves of immigrants of diverse descent for a multitude of reasons. Yet, post-World War II period, particularly during mid-1940's, 1950's and 1960's, witnessed unprecedented influx into major industrial cities for reconstruction efforts. 7, 8 Up until late 1960's, no specific laws addressed inter-ethnic violence and conflict. Ironically, ex-colonies subjects were regarded, after all, as second class citizens. 9 Only when families of 'Asian' (primarily Pakistani, Indian and Bangladeshi) workers started to 'flood' English cities and ports in what is referred to as 'chain immigration' (i. e. residents invite close family members and friends and, once settled, relatives and friends invite their own families and friends) did

local acts of ethnic violence give prominence to and raise public awareness on a national level of 'alien' citizen status as part of British reality. 10

Still, post-World War II period is one characterised more by inflammatory statements made about nationals of 'non-British' blood and descent 11 rather than about citizens whose allegiance to 'British' values and way of life is questionable because of a different creed such as in case of South-Asians. Indicative of an increasingly racialised public discourse pertaining to immigrants and 'naturalised' subjects is:

When individuals like the Marquis of Salisbury spoke of maintaining the English way of life, they were not simply referring to economic or regional folk patterns, but explicitly to the preservation of 'the racial character of the English people'. We have developing here a process of subjectification grounded in a racialised construction of the 'British' Subject which excludes and includes people on the basis of 'race'/skin colour. 12

Indeed, 'race' remains a fundamental subtext of British hegemonic discourse during colonial era, in post-World War II period and beyond. For one, one staple justification for subjugation of nations, groups and individuals is race. 13 Further, in case of a South Asian minority, presumably 'British Subjects', race is invoked as a justification for inequalities at workplace, housing, education, let alone political rights. 14

In essence, 'race' and 'racism' essentialise subjects of 'racist' acts. Similar to all hegemonic practices which maintain specific power relations within an overarching power structure, racism emphasises superior vs. inferior duality

in order not only to maintain existing power relations but also to ‘morally’ justify ‘excesses’ of inequalities. 15

In British context, South Asian workers – predominantly from Pakistan, India and Bangladesh – particularly during first mass immigration waves of 1940’s, 1950’s and 1960’s were, like a gear fit into a larger wheel, brought in as props, imported, used, and returned. Initially, South Asians workers performed and acted as underdogs – much to masters’ delight. Later, however, as familiarity of British ‘System’ and ‘Administration’ developed amongst workers of non-British blood, riots and protests became noise (racist) masters needed to work on. Thus, successive legislations ‘regulating’ immigrants’ status within U. K. borders were, apparently, meant to control influx of immigrants and to align ‘British Subjects’ along well-defined ethnic boundaries. 16 As U. K.’s ethnic makeup diversified over time and across localities, state’s insistence on ethnic markers between and within ethnic groups grew by leaps and bounds.

The ‘racism’ formula, endorsed by laws and working brilliantly in a colonial era and slightly so within borders during early days of mass immigration, turned out problematic if not unstabilising given growing pressures of growing minorities in pocket cities, minorities now capable of tipping vote balance.

Ultimately, a multi-ethnic / multicultural society is not – based on a goodwill, all-accommodating multiculturalism discourse – one meant to acknowledge ethnic / racial / cultural differences per se by way of minority rights but, rather, one emphasizing ethnic markers for further state control. 17 In fact,

state control, in so far as British Muslims are concerned, represents a clear instance not only of an ethnicity manipulated (at multiple layers of discourse in government, media, and education) but, further still, of an identity (i. e. ‘ BrMislim’ / ‘ BrAsian’) manipulated (at just same layers) – and hence fluidity of what constitutes ‘ Islam’ / ‘ Muslim’ and, probably in turn, Islamophobia. Understanding an emerging Islamophobia requires, however, an examination of evolution of race relations politics from one based on ‘ race’ to one based on ‘ faith’.

### **Race, faith, Islamophobia, and multiculturalism**

By definition, political discourse is one characterised by manipulation and is, largely, subject to voters’ sway in democracies. 18 Political Correctness (PC) is just one example of political machination. In essence, a politically correct expression is a euphemism meant (and, for that matter, meaning) less to fulfil felicity conditions required for an actionable statement and more as instrumental. Thus, British policies on race and ethnicity has marked a shift since installation of race relations acts of 1965 and 1968 19 from an emphasis on racial discrimination to an emphasis on religious ‘ extremism’ and ‘ bigotry’ as a basis for incrimination – only selectively, excluding BrMuslims.

Indeed, incitement to hatred based on affiliation to Islam is one major legal anomaly scholars continue to point out to. 19, 20 Interestingly, given paper’s purposes, racial discrimination against BrAsians has not, in fact, been eliminated by virtue of progress in legislation on racial relations but only diverted to another (unprotected by law) dimension, significant as is, of a BrAsian subject’s identity. That is, being Muslim.

That multilayered public discourse has, moreover, shifted from 'race' to 'faith' is indicative not of actionable (as opposed to pronounced) change but of power structure(s) embedded in race relations discourses in the U. K. Thus, in place of a racialised discourse based on 'BrAsian' intrusion into 'Britishness', same racial group, now 'British Muslims', comes out as anti-British. Typical of a manipulative political discourse a game of labelling and re-labelling underprivileged, underrepresented groups (except in prisons) is enacted such that power relations are engineered, largely but not always by, state are maintained within and between different ethnicities in a 'multicultural' community which is, Britain. Unsurprisingly, a set of composite metrics has been developed in order to 'measure' 'Britishness'.<sup>21</sup> That such metrics combine gauges of loyalties at intra-national (i. e. Britain), national (i. e. England, Scotland, etc), or local (e. g. Bradford) levels is, indeed, indicative of an ethnic identity crisis, particularly so in case of BrAsians / BrMuslims. As a consequence, a group diverse as BrAsians / BrMuslims and framed as 'inassimilable'<sup>22</sup> into wider and mainstream community is bundled up altogether, labelled and made alien. Islamophobia is, one argues, an expression of an anxiety over ethnicity identity.

Indeed, Islamophobic sentiments are, upon close examination, aimed not at Islam per se but at Muslims.<sup>23</sup> In fact, literature repeatedly points out that people, rather than faith, is phobes' trajectory.<sup>23, 24, 25</sup> A broad overview of British media is indicative of who is meant and labelled:

If you doubt whether Islamophobia exists in Britain, I [Gordon Conway, Head of Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia] suggest you spend a week reading, as I have done, a range of national and local papers. If you

look for articles which refer to Muslims or to Islam you will find prejudiced and antagonistic comments, mostly subtle but sometimes blatant and crude. Where the media lead, many will follow. British Muslims suffer discrimination in their education and in the workplace. Acts of harassment and violence against Muslims are common. 26

Thus, Islamophobia, a label gaining currency in media and academia – thanks to Runnymede Trust's much publicised report 'Islamophobia, a challenge for us all' 27 – has acquired such a canonical status as to render alternative neologisms 'unrepresentative' of responses to Islam / Muslims. According to Halliday,

'Islamophobia' indulges conformism and authority within Muslim communities. One cannot avoid the sense, in regard to work such as the Runnymede Report that the race relations world has yielded, for reasons of political [emphasis added] convenience, on this term. 28

Moreover,

The use of 'Islamophobia' also challenges the possibility of dialogue based on universal principles. It suggests...that the solution lies in greater dialogue, bridge-building and respect for the other community, but this inevitably runs the risk of denying the right, or possibility, of criticisms of the practices of those with whom one is having the dialogue. Not only those who, on universal human rights grounds, object to elements in Islamic traditions and current rhetoric, but also those who challenge conservative readings from within, can more easily be classed as Islamophobes. 29



Thus, Islamophobia is employed in such a politically correct fashion such as to silence criticisms, on one hand, and to maintain 'good neighbourhood relations', on another. The former stance is framed, in right-leaning perspective, as 'militant', 'jihadist', 'terrorist', 'uncivil', 'anti-modern' and 'anti-Western'.<sup>30</sup> The latter is framed, in 'Islamist' perspective, as 'accommodating', 'assimilative' and 'hegemonic'. In between is media, an arena for meaning-making and shifting perceptions.

Alternatively, Islamophobia can be employed not as a politically correct euphemism in order to silence internal criticisms or to maintain law and order but, rather, to militate against an 'other'. This could take a shape of dismantling politeness courtesies essential not for a politically correct dialogue but for one based on critical questioning. Still, Islamophobia could be further employed such as a cover up for supposedly hidden hegemonic agendas.<sup>31</sup>

One peculiar shift for Islamophobia as contested within a U. K. context is how – instead of 'imported' aliens made 'citizens' being instigators of hate, violence, unrest, and, ultimately terror – an 'enemy within' image is constructed and maintained such as to, apparently, pass Islamophobic sentiments, if any, from one generation onto another.<sup>32</sup> For some – now increasingly most, credit to media – rivers of actual blood running London streets following London 7/7 (à la 9/11 codification) attacks are reminiscent of symbolic blood as invoked by Enoch Powell in his Birmingham speech in 1968:

As I look ahead, I am filled with foreboding. Like the Roman, I seem to see ‘ the River Tiber foaming with much blood’. The tragic and intractable phenomenon [i. e. immigration] which we [emphasis added] watch with horror on the other side of the Atlantic, but which there is interwoven with the history and existence of the States itself, is coming upon us here by our own volition and our own neglect. 33

Unsurprisingly, Powell’s xenophobic pronouncements – just as all xenophobic pronouncements – gain further inertia as an apparently self-fulfilling prophecy comes true. Admittedly, most, if not all, far-right politics tap into a well-rehearsed repertoire of phobias – not least Islamophobia. Moreover, whole political careers are created and enhanced based on precautions from an ‘ other’: now of colour, now of race, and now of different faith. Across Europe, ballot boxes speak volumes of Islamophobia tapped into as a ‘ final recourse’ against an imminent ‘ green menace’ within. 34, 35

### **Islamophobia: European context**

Placed in a wider context, Islamophobia is not exclusive to U. K. As a matter of fact, for Europe – in which U. K. is situated and to which it is historically affiliated – Islamophobia is a common currency. Indeed, each European country has a distinctive narrative to tell of Islam / Muslims. Yet, for all differences, European nations – especially former colonial powers – share common narratives of ‘ home-grown terrorists’ and phobias. 36 Interestingly still is how European nation states follow a similar pattern of state controls over flow of (now particularly Muslim) immigrants as well as controls of modes of conducts of minorities within. 37

In fact, U. K.'s, and for that matter Europe's, current immigration laws and policies cannot be fully understood in isolation of European conception of nation-states.

Historically, European nation-states evolved into democratic polities in which upholding order and rule of law required consistent policies. 38 As European countries grew increasingly into political, economic and scientific powerhouses, an increasing influx of immigrants required subtler means of control. Typically, in major European countries such as U. K. enacting multiculturalism policies meant, at least apparently in so far as actual practices are concerned, less room for truly diverse communities and more for accommodation, assimilation, and full integration of an increasing 'alien' presence posing, allegedly, menaces to established European Enlightenment canonical values of reason and secularism. 39 Probably understandably, far-right currents in European politics manipulated political machinery – inciting violence and hatred at times – creating, only in voters' minds, all sorts of phobias.

The case for Islamophobia is one, consequently, which can be understood primarily based on power relations established and maintained in a wider power structure of Europe. This is particularly significant if one is to grasp 'global' (i. e. Western) war on Islam, which is not. For all long-established and nourished power structures need a signifier, a marker, which, presumably, contains, defines, and tags an assumed other only to maintain 'law' and 'order' in an endless historical power struggle over hearts and minds.

In conclusion, Islamophobia is, ultimately, a (mis)label slapped onto bottled up power relations within a marked power structure. In U. K. context, Islamophobia is used, as has been demonstrated, not to mark a shift in discursive practices towards a truly multicultural community but to maintain embedded power relations in which specific groups are assigned definite space within ethnic markers. Initially, race is used to maintain power structures but upon introduction of race acts and laws, subtler forms of control and manipulation are employed by which focus is shifted from 'race' per se to 'faith' not as a creed but as another boundary of control.

Within (i. e. in BrMuslims community), Islamophobia is employed by Islamic leaders such as to appropriate an exclusive definition of Muslims and Islam, on one hand, and in order to silence internal power struggle over meaning-making of Islam and, probably, anything else. Finally, in a broader context, Islamophobia is employed as a means of control and manipulation of Muslim communities within, multiculturalism policies aside.

### Notes

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