



Unpicking Horrifying Moments of Uneasy Silence: Writing Responses to Gestures of Islamophobia in the UK: A Duo-autoethnography

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Abstract

This duo-autoethnography explores responses to a recurring hiatus in conversations when I, a white English woman, state that I am married to a man with an Arabic name. Together, my husband and I have used practices of creative writing for therapeutic purposes to examine our personal encounters with Islamophobia in the UK. This article evidences the power of co-inquiry, demonstrates the necessity of flexible responses to written expressions of trauma; and reveals *outrage* and *silence* as distinctive ways of coping with discrimination. It shows an incongruence in the binary which presupposes white non-Muslim men to be superior in their ability to respect women and highlights the need to dismantle white supremacy in trustworthy environments to avoid unhelpful fight-or-flight responses.

Personal responses have been written, acknowledging structures of wider political, social, and historical contexts shaping social conditions.

Keywords: creative writing for therapeutic purposes, co-inquiry, evocative autoethnography, intersectionality, Islamophobia, trauma.

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Beginning to Write

Coffee shop, oat milk lattes, hearts in the froth.

Friend: *Wow, Luce you're looking good. What are you doing?
Whatever it is, I want some.*

Me: *I've met a new man!*

Friend: *It shows, you're shining! What's his name, what's he like, have
you got a picture?*

She is excited.

Me: *He's called Shaamil, lives in ..., he's got two children ...*

*I feel my words dropping into a different space. Her delight shrinks,
she stiffens and leans back just a millimetre or two. Her facial
expression changes. The smile remains, but the sparkle has gone.
Awkwardness hangs in the air. I want to get back to the fun of the
meetup, so I mitigate the moment.*

Me: *He's about as Muslim as I am Christian.*

When I mention my husband's name, I notice an uncomfortable hiatus. This article explores this silence and why I was neutralising tension with a betrayal of his 'Muslimness'.

What We Did and Who We Are

Shaamil and I decided to use writing responses to examine this hiatus together. We planned four 1-hour long workshops between October 2021 and August 2022. We started this process formally but later agreed to allow ourselves a more dynamic and non-linear plan to produce responses.

We invite you to find yourself somewhere positioned in this story. It may not reveal definitive truths, but we hope you come to understand how we experience the phenomenon and are able to set this against wider political, social, and historical contexts which 'shape the conditions of our society' (Manzoor-Khan, 2022, p. 75).

We may all be racist because we are living within a global white supremacy, and this is our conditioning. Shaamil and I are both culturally bound by the socialization of racist notions and prejudice. Our marriage is not a badge of non-racism although we both acknowledge some enjoyment of the performative element at times. We recognise our relationship

represents attempts to make reparations but also acts as an indication of how colonialism still possesses our consciousness. In truth, it is at best an area of acceptance and willing conversation made easier by the presence of love.

Shaamil was born in 1957 and raised in Cape Town, South Africa. Apartheid was the system of governance for his formative years, where the notion of white supremacy was overt and universally recognised. The system worked on everybody, and everybody responded to it in some way. This regime could be viewed as a microcosm of the wider global phenomenon of white supremacy. In South Africa, apartheid is named, and segregation is apparent, but in post Brexit Britain, it is more covert, and some seek to render it unnamed. We know that covert expressions of abuse are no less damaging than those which are overt. From a perspective of therapeutic intent, we know that sometimes it is easier to heal where the abuse can be clearly distinguished. Unnamed, or more difficult to spot, discrimination can be insidious and 'without recognition of racial trauma, and racially embodied trauma, the space in which we make links between feelings, thoughts and context...is diminished' (Taylor, 2022, p.131).

I was born in the Southeast of England in 1964 and have lived in the UK all my life. The idea that I am fully aware of my privilege, collusion, and phobic responses would be false and inauthentic. Robin DiAngelo makes 'White Progressives' (such as me) her speciality (2018, p. 5).

She writes,

If...I understand racism as a system into which I was socialized, I can receive feedback on my problematic racial patterns as a helpful way to support my learning and growth...racism is unavoidable and...it is impossible to completely escape having developed problematic racial assumptions and behaviours (p.4).

I write,

Some Things About Me

I come from detached houses, mown lawns, and mothers with hobbies
Greengrocers and milk on the doorstep
Panama hats and brownie badges
I come from violins, half size, and orchestra
Black jacks, dib dabs and fruit salads
I come from navy blue knickers, netball and hockey
Walkie talkie dolls and secretly shared Jackie magazines
I come from sailing holidays in Bude, Selsey and Gweek
Paid for by naval Cdrs and army Captains

I come from Christian aid and summer birthdays
From cousins in the priesthood
Bringing Christianity to the grateful Africans and
Upholding middle England
I come from Victoria sponge and jumble sales
If I wanted, I could poke the tip of my tongue through the slits in
Mrs Boscombe's long earlobes weighed down with diamonds.

Shaamil writes,

Some Things About Me

I come from Auntie Beyra and Tietie
A two-bedroom plot, single storey in Athlone
I played in the shells of Morris minors
And cowboys and Indians in the bush
I won marbles and made kites with crinkle paper, flour and water
While my mother cooked sugar beans curry with lamb
I come from where the meat was bought with hamper stamps
In shops where she didn't need to ask for halal

I was taught by Mrs Van Wyk and Mrs Arendse

If I was lucky on Eid I collected 5 cents from Uncle's hands
Damaged with psoriasis and hard labour
And in my tailor-made suit (purchased on a lay-buy) I bought
Penny baloney, Wilson toffees and
Nigger balls
I could spend 15 minutes reading Spider-Man, Thor and X-men and
then return the comic to the Indian shopkeeper.
I come from a place where I built my own scooter with roller bearings
I laughed nervously watching people without the right papers running
for their lives
At 10 years old it was entertaining
But it taught me to not speak out.
I come from a time when Islam was a way life
Not a dress code (that came after segregation)
And in the evening, I attended Slamse Skool
I ran home crying because I witnessed Falaka.
The grey dust road was covered with yellow pompoms
Fallen from Portjackson trees.
I come from Dukum and crayfish tails
From downward thrust eyes and British fashion.
My cousin's highest goal was to be married

I come from a land where women married men
Who laboured in a country they couldn't call home.

Islamophobia

Islamophobia (literally meaning fear of Islam) is one of the most prevalent forms of discrimination in the world today. We hear that

over 1 million Muslims are in concentration camps in China's Xingang province, being burned alive in the streets of Delhi,...forced to leave their homes in Myanmar, drowning in boats off the coast of Greece and Italy, trekking...across the Sahara desert from Mali, Chad and Niger, fleeing drone strikes in Somalia, sitting in refugee camps in Syria, revolting for their lives to matter...in the USA, unable to access their natural resources in Palestine, and being policed, imprisoned, detained and monitored in the UK and across Europe. (Manzoor-Khan, 2022, p. 7)

Western news media continue unashamedly to represent Muslimness in derogatory, demeaning, and dangerous ways. Why, in the UK, do we see extraordinary generosity extended to Ukrainian evacuees while considering deportation on planes to detention centres in Rwanda for black and brown refugees from places such as Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Iran?

I ask Shaamil,

Why don't Muslim people come forward to take in these refugees as so many came forward to take in Ukrainians?

He replies

For fear of being further ostracised'

Racism is so endemic in our society that we normalise war and strife for some but not for others. Discrimination regarding the ideology of Islam has 'historical and cultural specificity' (Foucault, 1997, p. 27) yet attempts to undermine or deny the concept of 'Islamophobia' are present in influential political spheres, and these in themselves, are efforts to silence and negate its presence in the UK. Media coverage continues to roll out all the stereotypes, women killed for wearing immodest clothing, girls being left uneducated, women not allowed out alone.

Despite apparent strides being made, it continues to appear that decades of misrepresentation and stereotyping outlined in Edward Said's seminal text *Orientalism* (1978/2019) have taken their toll in the collective unconscious, and many people still report horrifying and frequent incidences of ongoing Islamophobic discrimination.

Professor Salman Sayyid and Mr. Abdoolkarim Vakil describe Islamophobia as

ranging from everyday slow burning micro-aggressions to eruptions of violence and murder; its scope extends from classrooms and workplaces to neighbourhoods and state frontiers, from print and social media to the public square. Muslims find themselves framed by Islamophobia in the form of questions around national security, social cohesion, freedom of speech, gender inequality, and cultural belonging (Bhatti, 2021, p. 8).

Judith Butler says narratives use the capacity of discourse to construct outcomes through repetition and reiteration which produce further emotion (1997). The language of fear, used historically and extensively in western representations of Muslimness, has the power to affect emotion, leaving people unable to practice objectivity of feeling and neutrality of information. This fear and economy of truth can be used politically to contain people (Ahmed, 2010).

This is part of the backdrop of how we live.

I wonder, can I, as a white English woman, adequately address Islamophobia? Do I have something new to offer? My non-Muslim status renders me uncomfortable. Is it dangerous to enter this debate about religion and politics? Am I trying to distance or assuage myself from colonial intergenerational guilt? Am I guilty of appropriation? Perhaps I want to understand the cultural forces within my marriage better and integrate into Shaamil's life more deeply? To take on a project of this type is daunting, and I might be accused of pretending that I 'get it'; I don't. Ruthellen Jesselson says,

I would worry most if I stopped worrying, stopped suffering for the disjunction that occurs when we try to tell the other's story. To be uncomfortable with this work, I think, protects us from going too far. It is with our anxiety, dread, guilt, and shame that we honor the participants. To do this work we must contain these feelings rather than deny, suppress, or rationalize them. We must at least try to be fully aware of what we are doing. (1996, p. 70, cited in Etherington, 2007, p. 604).

Writing Together

The hiatus I experience engenders familiar feelings of anger and shame but also a new emotion—I feel hurt. These new feelings of hurt indicate that I have 'crossed a line, traversed a boundary between a perceived sense of self and other'. I feel a sense of 'in-between-ness' (Siddique, 2011, p. 310). As Kristeva says, 'living with the other, with the foreigner, confronts us with the possibility or not of being an other. It is not simply—

humanistically—a matter of our being able to accept the other, but of being in their place, and this means to imagine and make oneself other for oneself’ (1991, p. 13). This crossing meant that,

When I saw the image of the dead ‘migrant’ child, washed up in the waves on a pebbly British beach on the southeast coast I saw my husband as a child. I saw his son, my stepson, I saw Shaamil’s nephews and cousins and all of my new family, and I wondered what would cause a tragedy like that.

bell hooks believed that writing and language can be transformative, and that ‘love is profoundly political...the...foundation of all meaningful social change’ (2001/2021, pp. 15–16), so,

*I ask Shaamil to write and roam this difficult territory with me,
To hold my hand,
Tell me where I cannot stray.
He talks of Muzammil. A state of preparation for an important revelation.
Enshrouded in one another’s garments
You wear me and I’ll wear you.*

Shaamil’s perspective, and perhaps even his protection, became vital for this project. Using the ‘process of writing...for the gaining of insights’ (Williamson & Wright, 2018) we hoped to break silences, work through pain, anger, and uncertainty in order to re/claim our voices in the communities within which we moved. Our dialogue is underpinned with love, and a focus on family and community.

*It is only skin between us
It breaks the same
I wish
I could crawl inside yours
Closer to your warm wise heart.*

Duo-autoethnography – A Way of Life

Insofar as cultural representation is concerned, Shaamil and I share a discomfort with positivist, observational research methods. Such methods have always left gaps because they presuppose and maintain a certain power balance. Melanie Baak says, ‘research is a dirty word for many of those who have been affected by colonialism and its legacies’ (2016, p. 29, cited in Klevan & Grant, 2022, p. 16), and Linda Tuhiwai Smith states ‘the term “research” is inextricably linked to European imperialism and

colonialism' (2012, p. 1). Such methods felt inappropriate, reductive, and unable to give the depth, thickness, and richness that our subject matter deserves.

We made this epistemic shift from observational and hermeneutical data collection, choosing a practice-led 'form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context' (Reed & Danahay, 1997, cited in Etherington, 2004, pp.139–140). Autoethnography is borne out of a post-structuralist desire to 'resist colonialist...impulses of authority entering a culture' (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, citing Conquergood, 1991; Ellis, 2007; Reidman 1993). We felt that an even 'better solution to auto/ethnography that privileges the monologic voice of one person is a...cogenerative dialogue as method' (Stith & Roth, 2008, cited in Roth 2009). Working together democratises ownership of the data and creates a more level playing field, flattening some power imbalances (Fay Martin cited in Etherington, 2007, p. 613).

In this way, we can explore our experience of Islamophobia together, from the inside and the outside, and how it affects us as an interracial couple. Our lived experience and theoretical positioning are important (Klevan & Grant, 2022, p. 117) to enable this 'dangerous encounter' to be a 'source of learning', an opportunity to move from 'unknowing...to a position of understanding' (Siddique, 2011, p. 315).

We use writing in a rhizomatic sense to produce a transcultural dialogue which may transcend 'grand narratives' and use our personal experience for knowledge production (Deleuze & Guattari, 2001). By *rhizomatic* we mean work produced without a linear structure. Empirical research has much to do with categorising and finite conclusions, but 'how can we be listening for the unknown if we are constantly striving to make it fit into the categories of the known?' (Klevan & Grant, 2022, p. 83). Hence, we wish to remain open, to acknowledge that we may progress down many avenues, where connections are made, where our ideas assemble with others, but also where ideas break open, rupture, join-up, or lead to dead ends. We hope to map out some new territory on the subject (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/2001). Bringing these Deleuzian concepts to the subject also means that we can surpass arboreal notions of power and hierarchy and question dogmatic thought (Deleuze, 1968/1994).

Co-enquiry is about a genuine dynamic dialogue (person to person, subject to subject) where human dignity is acknowledged in each other (Pohl, 1999; Panko, 1976). We are aware that place and relationship transform identity, so work with the idea that 'cultural self-analysis rests on an understanding that self is part of a cultural community' (Chang, 2008, p. 26). This means we can make an exploration of how our individual heritages of indoctrination meet as a response to the moments of a silent encounter. Martin Buber (cited in Panko, 1976) calls this the I-Thou relationship rather than the 'othering' encounter of I-It. We understand ourselves to be relational beings who do not individually represent separate cultures. However, our actions, interactions, and reactions only make sense because they are coming from certain cultural backgrounds. We are, as Gergen says,

carrying a history of relationships, manifesting them, expressing them...they are inhabited...as well by the relationships into which they are directed (1999, p. 133, cited in Sparkes, 2002, p. 217).

This study focuses on being intentional and at the same time self-critical. We challenge 'cultural and hegemonic standards' and focus on 'differently valued knowledges'. This means we 'examine systems, institutions, and discourses that privilege some people and marginalize others' (Boylorn & Orbe, 2021, pp. 6–9). Autoethnography and critical autoethnography aim to resist violence in practice and 'candor is key—being willing to say what no one else is willing to say' (Shields, 2011, p. 587).

Ethical Gathering

Shaamil and I acknowledge that our writing can only 'represent...an attempt to capture contextual truths that can be accepted as true to the extent that they were created at a certain time and in a certain relational context' (Klevan & Grant, 2022, p. 10).

Our dialogue has an organic, rhizomatic life of its own, recognising new questions and considerations as they arise. This 'intermediate knowledge of the data set guides...subsequent data collection' (Chang, 2008, p. 115). Interpreting our responses continuously as a method of inquiry makes it possible to follow the data, step by step, where each exercise informs the next unbound by initial plans borne out of preconceived impressions or expectations. We chose to let the material drive the research inquiry. This dynamic and non-linear planning became a vital ethical practice when the

project became overwhelming, calling for a rethink and new commitment. This way, we make sure all moments of the study are negotiated ethically.

Butler says discourse can reiterate and repeat (1997); therefore, all ethical considerations are subject to interrogation as they may be bound by rules borne out of colonial or patriarchal aims. Dutiful ethics such as informed consent, provision of information regarding processes and outcomes of study, ability to withdraw, and confidentiality may not be entirely sufficient to uphold the dignity and worth of each human being. Issues can arise as subtleties to inform later ‘ethical-making practices’ (Etherington, 2007, p. 599) depending on the ‘demands of the context’ (Denzin; Villa-Vicencio, 1994 cited in Etherington, 2007, p. 601). This post-structural concept of ‘diffraction, entanglement, and difference has been vital’ to create new knowledge and to examine ‘how we view this knowledge’ (Klevan & Grant, 2022, p. 83). Shaamil and I are changed by the project, and this change is ever continuing in process.

Working relationally means there is ‘no leaving the field’ (Adams, 2012, cited in Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015, p. 61). Aware of our vulnerabilities, and to mitigate any feelings that the project was taking over our lives, we decided to have in place a self-care framework. We set processing time aside and have access to couples counselling should it become necessary.

Our writing sessions were short and boundaried to protect our time away from the project. During writing session 2 we noticed the topic was taking an emotional toll and felt protective of one another. The subject matter was causing stress and was, ‘too dismissive of the pain. After all it was not about an abstract political principle’, it was real (Hirsch, 2018, p. 111).

The study may expose others, but dogmatic and inflexible ethical rules regarding confidentiality can shut down or silence the voices of the abused. Grant and Young calls this *epistemic violence* (2021, p. 3) which may reinforce stigmatization and be viewed as unethical. We were not willing to silence our own voices as this would leave us with an inauthentic set of responses to a real issue. We acknowledge there can be a fine line between research and venting legitimate personal fury or ‘violent’ textual practice which may lend itself to revenge (Bergin & Westwood, 2003). It could have been impossible to write this paper without exposing others, but I think we have achieved it.

Our 'descriptive-realistic, confessional-emotive,...interval recordings' are thereby here recorded (Chang, 2008, pp.91,139–149).

Perceptions of Muslimness

You have to be careful, when you are free to think what you want, not to let in the thinking of others, in disguise, the false thinking of your father and mother, the spurious thinking of your grandfather, the masked thinking of your brother and sister, in other words, of your enemies (Diop, 2018, p. 43).

Colonialism is shameful in an ontological sense as well as ethically. In the UK we are so saturated with whiteness, white supremacy, and the impacts of colonialism that the task to dismantle conscious and unconscious belief systems is gargantuan. Timothy Bewes suggests that to 'free ourselves of [the] most intimate residue of the colonial enterprise it is necessary to overcome the models of thought and perception that made colonialism possible in the first place' (2010, pp.164–165). Even the concept of postcolonialism can be seen as a divisive western¹ construct as it presupposes that we live in times where colonialism is no longer a practice (Lucashenko, 2017). The 'ism' has the potential to erase the past and thus enable continued misunderstandings and silencing, perhaps encouraging further amnesia (Huggan, 2007, p.46) and hidden racism lodged in the discourse of postcolonialism.

Baroness Warsi states that Islamophobia is to be recognised as targeting anything which may be perceived as an identity marker, including a name (All Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims, 2018, p. 12). These incidents are described as expressions of racism 'targeting...Muslimness, or perceived Muslimness (p. 17). Shaamil can cite many incidences of friends and professionals who have used westernised names to prevent marginalisation and discrimination.

Western definitions of Muslimness are tied up with ethnic groups. 'The position 'that "race" is somehow more real than religious identity, or at least more legitimate basis for discrimination and oppression' is not acceptable or politically sustainable. It is important to be able to distinguish between faith/spiritual practice and racial origin (Denazin & Giardina, 2017, p. 5).

¹ The western world here means a number of regions, nations, and states, including most of Europe, North America, and Australasia.

From a western, Christian perspective, Muslimness or expressions of Muslimness may focus on ethnographic observations of behaviour, for example, praying five times a day, visiting the mosque, covering hair, wearing a certain type of beard, speaking Arabic, and so on. However, Shaamil makes the point that the word Muslim is derived from the root letters in Arabic (س ل م) that mean *safety* and *security*. The word Muslim is built on a paradigm that gives *مفعل* the role of the subject, i. e., a person who acts upon others.

Therefore, Islam may not neatly fit western categorisation as a religion or set of behaviours. Instead, it may be interpreted as the character and quality of a person. In the Qur'an, Muslim is not a person who belongs to a sect; to be Muslim is to be a peaceful person who cares for others and provides safety and a socio-economic system (*Salazar*) based on justice and human rights (*Haq*).

More Silences

We notice that when we discuss our research with our Muslim friends, it opens an outpouring of daily incidents of Islamophobia and racism. These moments were, up until this point, not spoken about in my presence and taken for granted as a part of the fabric of life. However, when we reveal in white British company the nature of our project, we are often met with uncomfortable silence, moments of interest infused with unease, stories of women who had married Islamic men and the fates that had befallen them (children abducted; women unable to go out during the day; the presence of an unacknowledged previous wife; even stories of murder) and, after this, a changing of the subject. I remain silent and wonder, how do these rumours develop? Where are the positive love stories?

What strikes me is the sense of danger and, what Bewes refers to as, the 'source of shame' (2010, p. 163). The white British reticence may be confusion about the subliminal messages about Muslimness that they encounter. Perhaps some feel caught in the headlights of uncomfortable truths, and to face the issues is an unbearable encounter. White people may redden up and/or begin a defence. DiAngelo says 'even a minimum of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive... behaviours...to reinstate white racial equilibrium' (Lee, C. C., in Charura & Lago, 2021, p. 57). The fear of exposure or being classed as racist can feel so messy and traumatic that avoidance may be a preferred option to maintain wellbeing. I wonder too, if white people are aware that change

means losing something, a threat to identity. If so, to flee and opt out might feel a safer option.

There are many silences on the subject matter. It seems that all of us, to some extent, are wearing masks of resistance, and silencing ourselves in one another's company, hostage to shame and injustice.

I write,

The elephant in the room rages and loves.

Hiding in grey shadows.

Racism has a profound effect on the wellbeing of all people.

a. The Lead Balloon Phenomenon

When we started writing, both of us reported feeling exposed and vulnerable, so we shared only that which we wish to share.

Our first workshop was to record how we felt about the hiatus. Shaamil explained that he experienced the 'moment of silence' all the time as his presence created it. He lived *in it* as opposed to encountering it.

He wrote,

I have not experienced this moment; my presence removes the momentary encounter.

My writing is, therefore, in response to brief moments of time, his is to a whole experience of what is unsaid around him.

Shaamil writes,

Comfortably Numb

My name

Resonates with all in earshot—silence

I am an alien – boogiemán/and mass murderer, possible terrorist

I have become numbed to it

Fend it off and somehow, I come up trumps

The sight of me is a shocker

Middle eastern would-be killer

Easily disputed

They have no knowledge but media jargon.

Sadly, for them—I am not from the middle east

They have no knowledge, just media jargon

They are belittled by enlightening facts/stats
I feel more comfortable. Accepted

I have become numbed to it—it's normal
It just goes over my head, I ignore insinuations
Which resonate within earshot
Silence.

I write,

Something Wrong

There must be something wrong
His name drops like an uneasy balloon
Into happy, sparkly, white wedding joy

His name drops like a water-filled balloon
Stupid, duped old woman
I don't want to be around for the mess

Silence needs filling
How are your children? Where did you meet him?
I don't want to be around for the mess
I can't help you.

I am floating away
Happy, sparkly, white wedding joy
You are alone, your bed, you lie in it
There must be something wrong.

Debrief

Shaamil and I were surprisingly tired after this exercise. We retreated to bed and slept for a couple of hours although it was still only midday. It seemed such a simple exercise and yet stirred up much. At first, we were unable to discuss the experience,

*All we wanted was timelessness
To twist a globe between sheets
To push away unease
So, we could hold love like a blown glass bowl.*

b. Ongoing Conversations and Unbearable Encounters

Settling into another exercise after this was difficult. We were both avoiding it and were silent on the subject for a while.

Then, after some time, we decided to focus on sexual politics and concerns about how Muslim men treat women.

We read the chapter ‘The Feminist and Queer-Friendly West? The Patriarchal Rest?’ (Manzoor-Khan, 2022, pp. 135-148) three times together and planned to write our responses.

In the first section of this chapter, Manzoor-Khan unpicks how, in the UK, images of women wearing hijab and niqab are used to illustrate their subjugation due to Islam. She cites how in western societies women are encouraged, required, requested, or forced to remove these to assimilate and prove their independence and to challenge the Muslim narrative. In the west, Muslim women’s choice of dress is viewed as an expression of submissiveness and shyness and the removal of these items liberating. The wearing of these is also aligned with Muslim stereotypes such as arranged/forced marriage, servitude to fathers and brothers, honour killings, genital mutilation, all of which represent Muslim patriarchy.

She continues to question the idea that presents Muslimness as a cultural distinction rife with patriarchy and violence set against the west in a binary sense. This binary then presupposes that the west is non-violent and does not express misogyny in its culture. The west is meant to be portrayed as liberal.

Manzoor-Khan then reminds the reader of the actual figures of all women in the UK who are subject to patriarchal domestic violence. She also informs the reader that for those who are Muslim, policies such as The Prevent Strategy serve to keep them quiet and unable to speak up for fear that they and other family members may be deported or ostracised from communities.

She states that the western press are always looking for story to corroborate anti-Muslim sentiment. This does not liberate Muslim women. Manzoor-Khan does not think that Muslim women living in western societies are safer as they are subject to racism, misogyny, and abuse from non-Muslim people. She does not think that non-Muslim women are any more safe or less likely to be subject to rape, violence, abuse, and other forms of misogyny at the hands of non-Muslims.

Manzoor-Khan goes on to remind the reader that the feminist view of removing hijab and niqab as a representation of emancipation is colluding with anti-Muslim sentiments seeing uncovering one’s body as a universal symbol or expression of freedom and the idea of making oneself available to the white male gaze as liberating.

Responses

We couldn't write, but I wanted to push the project forward so put forward an exercise

Write a letter to the chapter. To Manzoor-Khan

Write back an imagined letter

Perhaps a letter from our 'wise self' with solutions.

This felt ridiculous. After much talking, I gave up control of the project and listened to Shaamil. Listening moment by moment and not sticking to the plan was vital at this stage. As Fiona Hamilton says, 'plan less and trust more. Research is all about remaining open'. (Bolton, Field, & Thompson, 2006, pp.141–142).

Eventually we wrote these responses.

Shaamil wrote,

Sure, I have summed up these experiences over the years. They have become a non-event and fade into oblivion. Most times when I am aware of it, not the silence, more the disdain of me being in the company or even a feeling of invading the company, I just smile to myself. Adopting the mindset, 'they really don't know me' or 'poor ignorant folks'. I then become judgemental thinking about the narrow unfulfilled life they are experiencing or how difficult it is to move away from the 'put me down' narratives of a terrorist/Muslim/heathen or lately child sex groomer. What a waste. Lost opportunity.

I remember a conversation with a German national who accused me of not integrating into the UK culture. Another narrow-minded conversation as his kids went to a German school and they attended a German church.

Being a non-drinker, I hardly frequent pubs which according to this German was the fabric of UK culture and the way for me to integrate.

I never had a problem or issue with integration.

When Lucy told me the first time of her experience of the silence, I felt hurt, sad, even responsible. Sadly, these are the normal negative narratives for someone of an Islamic cultural background and of colour.

I have rid myself of these horrible feelings, all the disdain, the silences, the judgements and constant prejudiced slurs levelled at me directly or indirectly. I have moved over, under, through and away. They do not bug

me at all. They have now surfaced again in the realm of my wife, this hurts me. Like I said I am indirectly responsible.

Apologies to my kind and loving life, wife. She does not deserve any harm.

I wrote,

I'm ashamed that I have mitigated silence with betrayal. Although Shaamil doesn't ritualistically pray 5 times a day, go to the mosque or fast any longer does not mean that he is not a Muslim. He will tell you that he embraces Islam. He questions religion, as a construct. So, I guess to say, he's as much a Muslim as I am a Christian, may be true. But this is not how I have meant it. I have said it to mellow things, to stop your fears and judgements, to ease the uncomfortable silence.

I will not do this anymore.

I feel guilty about the project altogether. I am rubbing his face in this subject matter.

Shaamil knows it is there and chooses something else. It's clear.

Now I too, have had enough, the phobias are, ridiculous, contemptible and not worth my time.

I have never been treated with so much respect by a man in my life. Given so much space to be myself.

That comment 'You know no white man will ever sleep with you again, he will feel inadequate' is so telling on so many levels.

Yes, I think you inelegant western men may be jealous because Muslim men know how to be with a woman.

It's sickening, horrifying.

Ask yourself

How do you respond to Muslim-ness?

Ask yourself about the political actions of the west in Muslim spaces.

I kick being British, I have crossed over to somewhere new.

And those silences. They insult me too.

Shaamil and I were saturated.

The project needed to be contained.

Shaamil chose to refuse more digging into the subject. And instead chose love.

I wrote,
I have felt a right to roam
Retraumatising
An abysmal hole of gawping ignorance
Ignore ~ ance

In her book, *How to Read Now*, Elaine Castillo writes of ignorance 'We're besieged on all sides by the comforting logic and pathos of ignorance. It's a logic that excuses people...from their actions...Most people are not, in fact all that ignorant' (2022, p.13).

c. Who is the project for?

I ask Shaamil what he had learned from the project.
He responds, 'nothing new'.
I feel frustrated. He is resigning himself to the problem, shutting it out. It's too painful. I am digging in, digging up.
I see the news on our screens again.
The SAS are being investigated for shooting Afghan men who have surrendered. It seems they were shot in cold blood, 54 of them. What if they had had white skin? If they were Russian. Just the presence of white skin and non-Muslim-ness would have it land differently in consciousness. Why are their lives mattering less?
Of course, nations are angry about brutalities, people are angry and want to retaliate, be heard in whatever way possible.
This is how it is.
Exposure of truth is congruence.
Congruence is healing.
The great white civilisation
is falling.

And then I wrote 'vulnerably at this crucial turning point' (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 9)

White Male Gaze

Look at me

Free

Body

See

Free

Me

Free me

Me

Running

Through trees, roads, streets

On the sand,

Blue sea-wind in my hair

Pink face, pink shells,

Breezy skin

Thin

Eyes observe

Flies' eyes

Compounds of eyes

Horny men's eyes

Frightened mother's eyes

Jealous woman eyes

Shaming eyes

Sexualise

My eyes

Free me eyes

All eyes

Probing

Fingering eyes

Colonise

Patronize.

Pull a cloth between me and those eyes

Enfold, embrace, protect

I have found respect within this relationship. My body, my privacy, my boundaries are cherished in a way I have not experienced previously.

Shaamil's respect is fundamental, a relief, a yearning fulfilled. I am, at last, free from the white male gaze. As a woman who grew up in the 1970s,

when Jimmy Saville and Rolf Harris were lauded, I learned the nature of my culture.

Psychological Hijab

I crave to choose who I wish to be sexualised by.
Who I wish to arouse and who I wish to be aroused by

I realise my own trauma, the abuse and misogyny all my life in the UK.
I was not protected. I was not informed. These are old wounds for me. Here
I let them speak and hope for alchemy.

The fear of the Muslim man is incongruent for me. It just doesn't fit my
lived experience.

d. Nothing Is Something

So, what happens when two come together in dialogue, as counterpoints,
as couples do? We are probing issues and speaking from two different
vantage points. Can we two highlight 'the perpetual and impeding
undertone of violence manifested in a present day psyche?' (MOCAA, 2022)

Two together can amplify resistance, can resist gender and race,
history and time.

Driving

Me: (in the passenger seat) What do you think you have learned?

Shaamil: Nothing.

I am disappointed. I want more from him. How can I complete this
investigation without him.

Me: Really? Nothing?

Shaamil: Nothing new.

I wonder

Me: not even that there are other ways of doing research

Shaamil: I'm not sure any of it will make a difference.

He wants to remain silent

Nothing to add

He doesn't say I am in the category of people

From the Dutch East India trade

He says 'I'm in the category of people who no longer wish to discuss
this'

It is as if he has come to the end of the trip,
No relief in sight
But
Waves of something more than inconvenience.

Nothing is something
'I don't want to talk about it' is something
'Nothing new to be said' is something
'It's useless' is something
This horrifying moment of silence
is something.

From nothing and something all things can grow.

From 'I don't know' can come the right solution.

It is very hard to arrive at this point. To face it and write it down.

I find myself unable to breathe

The world is changing, and I can let it.

Conclusions – So Many Silences

Although, Shaamil and I acknowledge there is further room for deeper therapeutic probing beyond the remit of this project, this evocative autoethnography foregrounds experience and examines personal responses to gestures of Islamophobia revealing outrage as privilege and silence as strategy (Spry, 2011, p. 68). Trauma can be intergenerational, long term, continuous, and perpetuating. Words do not always dispel or ameliorate problems, sometimes silence is another option. Taylor states that writing can 'for some people...become an outlet for rumination and...can be potentially harmful' and 'perpetuate the experience' (2019, p. 18) noting that caution and sensitivity should be paid to an understanding of the actual trauma.

Racism and discrimination affect us all and will continue to replicate and damage futures. It is, at the same time, high on the agenda in collective consciousness in a new and potentially positive way since the George Floyd murder and Black Lives Matter campaign. Western cultures face challenges, and regardless of whether the matter is 'trending' or not, the issues remain urgent.

Van der Kolk says

our capacity to destroy one another is matched by our capacity to heal one another. Restoring relationships and community is central to restoring wellbeing (2014, p. 44).

With care, perhaps this is possible.

It is uncomfortable. We are all vulnerable.

This is what we are with.

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Shaamil Windridge-Floris is a Clinical Dental Technologist registered with the GDC, practicing in Chepstow. He gained his expertise at the University of Kent in the UK and Cape Peninsula University of Technology in South Africa. He owned a laboratory in the heart of Brackenfell, RSA for seventeen years through the restrictions of Apartheid. Since emigrating to the UK in 2005 he has continued his business in both England and Wales. Shaamil has belonged to a Ghalka (circle of religious learning) for many years exploring religion and Islam. He is married and lives in Gloucestershire.



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