The Effect of Gender on the Experience of Second Generation Muslims

With countless portrayals of oppressed Muslim women in today’s media, I was inclined to further investigate the experiences of Muslim females on the University’s campus. It struck me as strange that Islam clearly recognizes the independence and equality of women, but this idea rarely permeates into the public sphere of knowledge. Additionally, Muslim families seemed to treat their daughters differently as the gender roles defined by culture became blurred with those of religious teachings. It has become increasingly clear that the experience of Muslim women is distinct from that of Muslim men on many different and complicated levels.

My research question, therefore, became focused on how gender specifically affected the experience of a second-generation Muslim. Among many things, the interviewees were questioned about their level of religious adherence. Are second generation Muslim females more adherent to the Islamic faith than second generation Muslim males? Does a disparity exist between the experiences of Muslim women and Muslim men? How has their faith functioned in their lives? More importantly, I wanted to see how American culture and the assimilation process had affected their lives. Are women more prone to the pressures of their religion as they not only attempt to maintain their Muslim identity but also adopt an American distinctiveness? Do these two identities contradict and cause a second generation Muslim to become alienated from her family? In order to investigate these interactions a set of semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted on campus involving male and female second generation Muslim students. Non-Muslim children of Muslim immigrants were also included in order to examine the intrafamilial influence of the Islamic faith.
The findings from this study speak to the many complexities that exist between religion, culture and gender. This small set of interviews provided insight into the experiences of second generation Muslims on campus and their perceptions of Islam and South Asian culture. Culture became a very important variable as it functioned to manipulate the basis of good Islamic living and most interviewees were quite aware of its presence. Contrary to my original predictions, the students whom I interviewed appeared to be extremely educated about Islam, its teachings and its restrictions. They were not passive instruments of their families but rather appeared to have a great amount of control over their lives and beliefs. Female Muslims, especially, displayed a strength and extensive knowledge of their religion and their unique position in the world.

To begin with, the responses of the participants failed to support the existence of a disparity between male and female Muslims. The separation between the two sexes was viewed as a mandatory part of the religion rather than an oppressive practice designed to create an inequality. Moreover, the female level of religious adherence did not appear to substantially differ from that of the male Muslims. Safa, while participating in MSA Think Tank, preferred to perform her prayers at home and rarely visited the local mosque except during the holy month of Ramadan. Mustafa, on the other hand, goes to the mosque at least once a day if not two to three times a day. Sahib, for example, felt that he was more religious than the average person but could not claim a considerable difference between himself and his female friends. He believes that each individual’s level of religious adherence could not be measured by forms of outward expression such as wearing hijab. When commenting of females who wear hijab he says:
“I feel they’re more contradicting themselves than anything, my own sister who
doesn’t wear hijab, I feel like she is more adherent than most of the girls who I
know that wear hijab, so I feel like they are just trying to appease their parents or
appease the society thing, ‘I’m a good Muslim because I wear hijab, like don’t talk
to me or look at me.”

He did, however, mention that due to American culture and its emphasis on
physical appearance Muslim women might have a harder time becoming “Americanized”
than Muslim males. Typical dress of American women, for example, tends to be more
revealing than the modesty of Islam would allow. Saniya, the non-Muslim daughter, also
commented on this difference in apparel, “like when I used to go to the mosque it bugged
me so much that the guys could wear t-shirts and shorts when it was hot out.” Despite
these differences in attire, neither gender was identified as having a more difficult time
than the other. Mustafa and Sahib both stated that their beards and dark features attract just
as much attention in public spaces than wearing hijab. For instance, Sahib says that his
mother and sister no longer wear hijab to the airport and he always makes an effort to go
clean shaven.

During the interview with Safa and Santoshi, it became clear that the differences
that existed between the genders did not originate in Islam but rather in society at large.
Santoshi, for one thing, felt that parents probably gave their sons less of a hard time due to
their anatomy and the baggage associated with sexual relations before marriage. She also
claimed that the honor of the family basically rested in the hands of the females with
families being less inclined to gossip about a male Muslim’s indiscretions. Safa agreed
with this and said that, “I can think of certain guys that were dating certain girls and it
wasn’t a big deal but those same guys will tell their sisters that when they go out they can’t do this and they can’t talk to guys.” Continuing on, they attributed this double standard to society in general and not specifically Islam. Safa, for example, stated that “it’s just a societal problem where we have the same, even in American culture and stuff, guys are allowed to get away with a lot more…you find [this problem] within a lot of different cultures, it translates over.” Obviously, Islam is not viewed by the interviewees to create a strong inequality between males and females despite their physical separation.

Often times, confusion occurred over whether religion truly disallowed certain actions or practices. The interviewees frequently felt that their elders confused religion with culture. Similar to the double standard discussed above, culture appeared to account for the assigned gender roles within South Asian families. Saniya, in particular, viewed religion to be extremely intertwined with culture. During her stay in India, she noticed that women weren’t allowed to party and drink in the same fashion that the men did. If women were out wearing the same types of Western clothes that the men did, it was assumed that she was a slut. Safa addressed this problem head on and states:

“I think that a lot of things they say that ‘Oh, well, based on our religion they can or whatever, whatever’ but…I think that the majority of the time they are thinking about culture but say that they are talking about religion, but I rarely believe them…so basically I think that, um, culture holds a lot more importance, like Pakistani culture and what the societal standards are, as opposed to religion.”

She continues to refer to this blending of culture and religion when she addresses the issue of piercings and tattoos. Safa’s mother, while not allowing her to get her belly button pierced, approves of piercings in the ears and the nose. Safa attributes her reluctance to
tradition and what has always been done rather than the true teachings of the prophet and the Quran.

While there are conflicting ideas that exist between American culture and Islam, the majority of the respondents felt that their Muslim identity complemented their American identity. Sahib, for instance, feels that his attachments to both cultures and knowledge of the languages have helped him both academically and socially. He sympathizes with both nations while welcoming an American Paki identity. For him, Islam makes life in the U.S. easier rather than more difficult. He says the following:

“For me it makes it very easy, I know when I was distanced from my faith life was quite terrible, the closer I got to it the happier I became cause I realized that with certain things I need to just go with the flow and roll with the punches, if you accept that there really isn’t control or let go of the illusion of control you actually become in control, it’s kind of a deep thing, I don’t know.”

Saniya also feels that her Muslim identity has grown to compliment her overall uniqueness. As she struggled with the increased attention that her South Asian background brought, her Muslim heritage became an interesting factor to all those whom she met. Even walking into her Hindi class, Saniya felt more normal than she did in her high school classes in which paranoia about her otherness flooded her thoughts. Even though Santoshi mentioned that her family often warned against adapting too much to American culture, she merely viewed this as her family’s fears of assimilation rather than her own. It stems from this that any contradiction that existed was between the outdated traditional beliefs of the parents and the second generation’s understanding of Islam. Although the participants’ families would often disallow or frown upon American activities, this was never viewed as a true
contradiction between the teachings of Islam and American life. A certain level of modesty and respect was expected, but a complete denouncing of American culture was never seen in the responses of the interviewees. Tradition, rather than Islam, appeared to be the source of the problem.

Along the same lines, the Muslim students whom I interviewed rarely claimed that they had ever felt alienated from their families as a result of their American identity. Sahib, in particular, felt fortunate that his parents have been so open and accepting. They allowed friends of different backgrounds, religions and genders to visit his house. Safa also feels as if her mother is fairly lenient having grown up in the U.S. and understanding that a certain amount of co-ed functions and events is normal. Unlike other Muslim females, she was allowed to attend co-ed parties and prom as long as she behaved in a respectable manner. Any amount of alienation that was found between themselves and their parents occurred as a result of ineffective communication. Safa found it extremely difficult to question and probe her mother about their religion. She describes her mother as, “strict in the sense that if I tried to push it somewhere further than where she has already allowed me to do then I get into trouble…beyond that nothing, no room for discussion.” If Safa attempted to have a conversation with her mother about religion and why certain restrictions existed, she would be accused of being disrespectful. College would often be blamed for her supposed defiance and disrespect.

Another example of feelings of alienation comes from the experiences of Saniya with her extended Muslim family. Due to the fact that Saniya is not a practicing Muslim she often feels distanced from her extended family and very self-conscious about how they view her and her immediate family. She often can’t help but think that her aunts and
uncles are considering moving back to Pakistan because they don’t want their kids to grow up like her and her sisters. She even describes one incident in which her auntie saw a shirtless poster of Tom Cruise on Saniya’s bedroom wall. After her aunt became very upset and condemned the poster Saniya was “heartbroken” and thought that her aunt thought less of her because of it. Despite all of her paranoia, Saniya states that, “I love my family to death and I know they love me to death and they would never think less of me because of who my mom is or because I have this American identity.”

An additional issue that was brought up throughout the interviews was familial pressures experienced by both males and females. While the students whom I interviewed rarely felt alienated from their families as a result of their American activities, it was frequently said that they received a great deal of pressure to adhere to Islamic traditions. Sahib, for example, quickly identified a list of attributes that his parents desired in his future spouse. While his father’s requirements were seen as unrealistic, Sahib admits that he wouldn’t marry anyone without his parents’ blessing. Differing from Sahib, Saniya has received a lot of pressure from her Muslim father to excel in academics. She finds comfort in discussing these types of pressures with other South Asian Muslim students as they can relate to her situation. Saniya attributes her father’s exceedingly high expectations to his own work ethic and experiences overcoming adversity.

Santoshi also describes some of the pressures her family places on her. Even though she comes from a Hindu family, the cultural pressures to behave a certain way mirror those seen in Muslim families. For example, she receives a great amount of pressure to stay away from boys and retain a “typical good girl” status. Santoshi is also pressured to always respect her parents and help with the family business. Her experience
only reiterates the blending of culture with religion. While Muslim women and men receive a great deal of pressure to lead an Islamic life, the respondents often questioned whether Islamic principles were really the guiding force behind their parents’ strictness.

After looking at the various types of cultural and religious pressures that second generation Muslims experience, it is surprising to find that, rather than a rebellious nature, the participants seemed to exhibit a thirst for knowledge. Their goal in questioning their parents about their religion is not to act disrespectful or unruly but to investigate the principles that guide their everyday lives. Instead of readily accepting everything that their families teach them, these students are inspired to seek out knowledge for themselves. Santoshi argues that, “You are supposed to continue to seek knowledge because you’ll never get to a point where you know everything, you are constantly learning in your lifetime.” Safa also asserts that, “I’m supposed to be a thinking being, if I’m not thinking or questioning, you’re not growing and that’s it, you’re done.” For instance, Safa was adamant about the fluid nature of the Quran and its ability to mold its principles according to the times.

Female Muslims were not the only ones questioning the true teachings of Islam. Mustafa also stated that he finds self contentment with his religion through asking questions and finding satisfactory answers. He claims that understanding is key. In fact, this was one of the main reasons why Santoshi was driven to being the conversion to Islam. She felt dissatisfied with her parents’ and grandparents’ answers that were based on “stories and mythology.” With an investigation into the teachings of Islam, it made more sense to her.
Sahib, a Sufi Muslim, exemplified this line of reasoning. Knowledge to him was power. He read all kinds of literature written by Muslim and non-Muslim authors, from Karen Armstrong to C.S. Lewis. He explained his philosophical outlook using a Sufi parable:

“A Sufi scholar once asked this traveling person what religion he belonged to and the man threw his hands up in the air and said, ‘I don’t know’ and the Sufi scholar told him that this was good, that the world is your scripture and that God resides in the world and he is also in your heart, so it’s like kind of confusing but it means that you use your life on earth to find truth, like everyone you meet is your teacher and you teach everyone something also, just because someone isn’t Muslim or someone isn’t Christian you shouldn’t short change them cause in the end, whether you believe it or not there is only one reality and one truth and I mean it’s up to you if you want to find it you will, if you don’t want to find it you won’t.”

It is because of this belief that Sahib is self-motivated to meet and talk with others of different religions and belief systems. In fact, he felt that coming to this campus he became more integrated with non-Muslims rather than Muslims.

With such a high focus on knowledge and learning it should follow that a level of adaptation occurs within many Muslim families. The second generation Muslims of this study commonly stated that their families had an increased level of understanding the realities of being Muslim and residing in the U.S. Sahib’s parents were very open to visiting friends, even accepting the fact that he spoke to numerous girls of varying faiths. Safa’s mother also was open and accepting of co-ed events, allowing her children to attend
Saniya’s little cousins are a prime example of how early awareness of religious and cultural differences can take place. She explains:

“Once I remember that I sneezed and nobody said anything so I was like ‘Oh, God bless you Saniya’ just joking around and my little cousin Maisa said ‘No, it’s Alhamdulillah’ and…my oldest cousin, who is like 9 now, said ‘Maisa, Saniya can say whatever she wants, some people say ‘God bless you’ and some people say ‘Alhamdulillah’ and I thought it was so sweet that she said that and she can recognize the difference and gage how that would make some people feel”

In this way, Muslim parents and families were not completely close-minded about American culture but were adapting as well.

Although it is commonly assumed that South Asians and Muslims are viewed as dangerous others, the results from these interviews suggest that the cultural and religious backgrounds of both female and male Muslims give them a certain exoticism. Even though Saniya often felt like an outsider while she attended Catholic elementary school, coming to campus helped her outsider status developed into an exotic attribute. Attending events at the cultural houses or even going to a random apartment party, she found that looks denoted a degree of mystery. Sahib also felt like he was looked at as exotic even though he was born in the U.S. He adds that, “very seriously, mostly Jewish girls come up to me, it’s like I’m forbidden fruit or something.” Curiously, the sex appeal associated with being “brown” was only recently brought to Mustafa’s attention, claiming that he hasn’t experienced much of this first-hand.

The general conclusion from my study is that the experience of Muslim females cannot be generalized but must be understood through the unique context and history that
surrounds that individual. Saniya, for example, was not a practicing Muslim and her father, who married an English woman, was not actively adherent to Islam either. Safa’s mother had spent the majority of her life in the U.S. and, therefore, was probably more lenient about American customs than most Muslim mothers. Sahib was a practicing Sufi Muslim making his experiences and thoughts distinctive from those of his fellow Muslim students. Muslim women and Muslims as a whole cannot be clumped together. It is through generalizing their beliefs, ideas and experiences that the majority of stereotypes and misconceptions are formed. As in other religions, each follower of Islam has his or her own form of adherence. Their interpretations of the Quran, their opinions about Islamic law and their views on South Asian culture are as vast as one would expect of one of the fastest growing religions in the U.S.