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“I kept telling myself I have to learn; it is good for me and my children”: Motherhood, motivation and learning English amongst a group of Pakistani British women

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Abstract

This article uses an Islamic lens to explore the question, *What are the identities, aspirations, and motivations for Pakistani and Muslim women learning English?* As Muslim women, the research participants had a strong allegiance to motherhood, with children being a motivating factor in learning English. This study explores how motherhood identities and the Islamic faith intersect in powerful ways for Pakistani British women learning English in the United Kingdom. The way that motherhood identity is conceptualised through the Islamic faith for these learners can be invisible to educational institutions and policymakers. The article offers an alternative narrative by directly engaging with women's lived experiences as language learners, as Muslim women and as mothers, thus contributing knowledge from the perspective of the learners, whose voices are often not heard in TESOL debates.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Research has demonstrated the importance of a desire to help one's children as a motivation for learners of English for speakers of other languages (ESOL). This article contributes to the scholarship by demonstrating how motherhood identities and Islamic faith intersect in powerful

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ways for Pakistani British women learning English in the United Kingdom. Through long-term qualitative fieldwork with Pakistani British women learning English, the authors explore the question, *What are the identities, aspirations, and motivations of Pakistani and Muslim women to learn English?* As Muslim women, the research participants had a strong allegiance to motherhood. This identity, and the specificities of how this identity is conceptualised through the Islamic faith, can be invisible to education institutions and policymakers.

As this article will illustrate, the role of the mother within Islam is particularly respected. The Holy Prophet (PBHU) emphasised the love and respect due to a mother by saying, “Paradise lies at the feet of the mother.” Together with this status is a role and responsibility to teach children and support them in accessing the moral values of Islam. As Khan and Mythen (2019, 2020) argue, Muslim identities are maintained and negotiated in everyday routines. At the same time, however, Muslim beliefs, values, and aspirations are questioned in the political sphere. This study offers an alternative narrative by directly engaging with women’s lived experiences as language learners and as Muslim women. The implications for educators include the importance of seeing beyond a homogeneous ESOL learner identity and recognising how other *translocation* identities (Khan, 2022) create the motivation and rationale for Pakistani British Muslim women to invest in learning a new language.

2 | MOTHERHOOD AND ESOL LEARNER IDENTITIES

The women in the study had *inter commonality* (Hussain, 2021) identities as mothers that bonded them. A well-established thread in the literature highlights that for some women being a mother can increase the motivation and aspirations to learn the English language (Allan, 2015; Elmore, 2017; Sidaway, 2021; Swinney, 2017). For example, Norton (2000) found that learning English was an investment for migrant women and linked to their gender identities. She refers to Rockhill’s (1987) study on Hispanic immigrant women, who talked about literacy in the context of family rather than as an individual right, measuring success as the extent to which their children and husbands were successful. Burns (2002) explored the experiences of migrant ESOL learners through narrative stories and found the importance of learning English stemmed from the desire to provide for their families; they had family goals as well as individual aspirations. Jouili and Amir-Moazami (2006) point out that a good, educated woman can mean a good, educated mother. Graham-Brown (2020) found that one of the main places of social interaction for ESOL female learners was the school or nursery (*school gate*) and involved small talk with other mothers and interaction with teachers. The mundane everyday routine of taking your child to school can build the confidence of young mothers. Park (2011) listened to the stories of English language learners in the United States, who mentioned that learning English meant that parents maintained their relationship with their children, for whom English became the dominant language. In these ways, English language learning can become “a crucial part of mothering identity” (Park, 2011, p. 165).

The scholarship mentioned above points to the complexity of learner identities, identifying the importance of motherhood, family, and community for many different ESOL learners. ESOL learners are not a homogeneous group; they come from different countries and cultures and hold different world views (Husserl, 1970). This study builds on this literature by focusing on the Islamic identity of motherhood, which inspired the participants in this research to access language classes. This article provides a rich, “insider” understanding through the stories of a particular group of Pakistani British women’s motivations as language learners. Muslim women’s lives are fluid and changing, and we need up-to-date studies to understand their different learning practices and aspirations.

3 | MUSLIM IDENTITIES AND ADULT LEARNING BEYOND A WHITE LENS

Khan (2022) argues that there has been a systematic “othering” of Muslims in the European imaginary for the last two decades, coupled with ongoing anxieties about integration and assimilation (Layton-Henry, 1992; Stopes-Roe and Cochrane, 1990). Aziz (2012) describes how Muslim women find themselves “trapped at the intersection of race, religion, and gender and suffer in silence” (p. 236) and struggle to move beyond their ascribed labels. Gandhi (1998) argues that “she is simply the medium through which competing discourses represent their claim” (p. 90); no one directly speaks to a female Muslim about her aspirations as a language learner. This causes injustice to Muslim women, as learners and as citizens, an injustice that permeates through language policymaking and into the classroom.

Postcolonial feminist writers from the global South, like Abu-Lughod (2013), Mohanty (2006), and Spivak (1988), challenge the supposed binary between Eastern oppression and Western freedom. Through its concern with how the Western world's representation distorts the experiences and realities of women from once colonised countries (Tyagi, 2014), postcolonial feminist theory offers a response to the othering of Muslim women learners. This research directly listens to the voices of ESOL learners who also happen to be mothers and challenges their subaltern positions in white societies. As we will go on to demonstrate, the participants, through their stories, offer a positive alternative to the dominant representations of Muslim women, who are seen as a “negative female ideal” (Khaf, 1999, p. 7), with Islam viewed as an oppressive, patriarchal religion. Key to this counter narrative is the need to resist viewing the mothering and learning practices of the participants through a white lens.

Writing about the experiences of Black women in the workplace, Rabelo et al. (2021) describe the effect of the white lens as scrutiny against “a sharp white background” (p. 1840) that takes certain practices for granted and erases others. While treating certain practices as universal or natural, the white gaze, defined as “a set of practices that communicates whiteness and reinforces white supremacy,” can “render Black women as guests or strangers in white spaces” (Rabelo et al., 2021, p. 1843). Considering the specificity of British Pakistani women's motivations for learning English, as we do in this article, is essential in order that they are not rendered “guests or strangers” in the ESOL classroom. In particular, understanding the intersection of mother identity and Islamic faith for these British Pakistani women disrupts a narrative about parental identity and learning motivation in which a white lens is imposed (assumed universal), presumed (taken for granted), and venerated (valued and preferred) (Rabelo et al., 2021).

4 | METHODOLOGY

The first study cohort was eight Pakistani women, former ESOL learners who I (first author) met at a community centre where I worked in the 1980s as a community development worker in ESOL classes. Through stories of their journeys over the ensuing years, the women described the impact of learning the English language, including what motivated them (Rasool, 2022). This research also involved a second group of 10 new Pakistani female learners wishing to learn English who were accessing the “Life in the UK” course to prepare for the British citizenship test. The women were all from the Punjab, Jammu, and Kashmir regions of Pakistan, and mainly from villages. All the participants were mothers, and some were grandmothers. I obtained (the first author) consent and made sure the women knew they could withdraw it at any time.

I (the first author) am a British-born Muslim woman of Pakistani heritage; my knowledge mainly comes from the Western education system and my Islamic faith. I shared with my participants the diaspora Pakistani history as a daughter of immigrants, a rich culture, a heritage language, and the Islamic faith. Kinship bonds unite us, making me a cultural insider. As an insider researcher, I understand the Islamic context of motherhood. Some of the older women agreed to take part because of our long-term connection. They knew me and trusted me, which added pressure to do justice to their stories. I did not know the new ESOL learners personally, but they knew of me through their family members, who endorsed me as trustworthy for having supported Pakistani women for a number of years.

Some of my experiences overlapped with those of the participants, such as the everyday microaggressions we face as Muslim women, an overlap I became aware of when I was listening to their stories, so I kept reflective notes to keep track of my own reality. There is an educational gap between me and some of my participants, which I was mindful of in our interactions. There are also challenges to being an insider researcher. I am an unmarried woman with no children, and sometimes there was some tension with the older participants about my choice, and I became an outsider within the realm of motherhood.

To engage with Pakistani women as language learners and understand their barriers and motivations, I drew on storytelling (Barkhuizen, 2019; McKittrick, 2021; Yuval-Davis, 2010) as a method that offered me a wide holistic lens to explore “the actual nature, shape and quality of their motivation while this may be pulled, shaped and remodelled by various socio-cultural, emotional, historical and psychological forces embedded within the person’s life capital and their field(s) of play (or contexts)” (Consoli, 2021, p. 124). Motherhood was embedded in the women’s emotions and social-cultural norms. Some interviews were conducted in the participants’ homes, where the role of the mother became more powerful, with children’s photos and grandchildren’s toys scattered around the room. Through a storytelling approach, I was able to gain a deeper insight into the realities of Muslim mothers learning the English language. Barkhuizen (2019) argues that “small stories are snippets of often mundane talk in conversations” (p. 100), allowing storytellers to construct their identities. According to Consoli (2022), stories of individual life trajectories promote a “fresh perspective on our research—a lens which, in the long run, may yield TESOL research that fully acknowledges, values, and celebrates the humanness of our inquiries” (p. 1), acknowledging the different world views and life experiences, histories, beliefs of our learners.

I adopted Braun and Clarke’s (2006) framework to code my initial data, selecting key primary concepts from their thematic analysis, such as identity, agency, independence, and aspirations, to frame the findings. I brought together all the key emerging concepts from the first round of coding and applied them to the second round of coding, adopting Miles et al.’s (2020) model that created patterns and theoretical constructs highlighting gender inequality and power.

5 | SOURCES OF POWER AND AGENCY

Through their stories, the research participants defined their own sources of power (Islam) and agency (children). The women in the research were strongly motivated to learn English, stressing that English was important to function in daily life, especially when talking to their children’s teachers and helping them with homework. One of the participants, Sharaz, speaks for most of the research participants when she says,

You cannot live in a country without knowing its language. It is hard now to just get by.

(1980s learner, Sharaz, March 2018)

During our conversations, the women referred to the Quran and the Hadith¹ as their major sources of moral guidance and as points of religious reference. The women stressed their Islamic duty to seek knowledge. The Messenger of Allah (PBUH) said, “Whoever takes a path upon which to obtain knowledge, Allah makes the path to paradise easy for them” (Shah and Farooq, 2022, p. 55). I interpret this to refer to all knowledge systems.

The research participants challenged, through their stories, the postcolonial trajectory of Muslim women in Western representation as victims of Islam and patriarchy. The women’s accounts provided a counter-narrative to the way Global Majority women are frequently storied as powerless victims (Mohanty, 2006), held back by men in their communities (Cameron, 2016), and prevented from accessing learning so they don’t know their rights. In fact, most of the women said the opposite about the support they received from male family members, like Sara, who talks about her father supporting her:

My father wanted me to learn English. He really encouraged me to learn English, saying, “In this country, you need to know English.” I first started learning English with a teacher called Christine. She was a volunteer teacher, and I could read but was shy to speak. I used to go to the multicultural centre English classes twice a week. I was attending a full week of classes. Wherever there were classes, I went.

(1980s learner, Sara, April 2018)

6 | THE ROLE OF MOTHERHOOD AND GRANDMOTHERHOOD

I first met Henna in the 1980s. Her interview took place in February 2018, where she explained that an opportunity arose when her children started school, to practise her English by volunteering and building her own confidence:

I had to keep telling myself, “I have to learn; it’s good for me and for my children as well.” When my children started going to school, they used to have “book days,” where you went into the school and listened to children read, or you read a book to them and asked them questions. It was called “Better Reading.”

Henna talks about learning for herself (learner identity) and for her children (mother identity). Learning a language can be isolating, and Henna sought out an environment to practise her English where she felt comfortable.

The desire to learn is mentioned by another ESOL learner who accessed English classes so she could visit her doctor independently and then progressed on to family learning courses and phonics delivered in her children’s school to help them. Sharaz says:

¹The Hadith is the record of the sayings of Prophet Muhammad (swas), a collection of books that serve as guidelines for the Islamic religion.

I needed to gain confidence and motivate myself to attend classes as I needed to learn English to go to the doctor on my own. When my children started school, I went on family learning courses and did lots of courses at their school so I could help my children. I translated stories from English into Urdu. For two years, I attended various literacy classes to assist my children's learning, including story-sack-making, numeracy, and phonics.

(1980s learner, Sharaz, March 2018)

Often, Pakistani women told their stories through their children and grandchildren as a way of framing their lives. Henna mentions, as a grandmother, how she finds social media a useful way of communicating with her grandchildren and how it motivates her to learn to use technology:

I can use social media, a computer, the internet, text, WhatsApp, Snapchat, Facebook, you name it. When my granddaughters go to nursery, their parents send me their photos, and I have to text them and say they are “looking pretty.”

(1980s learner, Henna, February 2018)

All the women participating in the research centred on the mother role when describing how and why they accessed ESOL. They justified their search for knowledge in a gendered way, linking it to motherhood and saying that their learning was also good for them and their children. As described above, for many Muslims, the Quran and Hadith lay down normative expectations of motherhood. Khan and Mythen (2019, 2020) argue that “Islamic scriptures provide a solid platform from which to subvert the everyday rehearsal of normative discourses” (p. 319). During our discussions about language learning, the women brought their mother roles into our conversation, and the older women repeatedly mentioned their mother status.

The motivation for the participants was specifically linked to the Islamic view of motherhood, including its centrality, value, and responsibilities. In our conversations, the mothers referred to their duty and responsibility, which included their children learning about Islam to guide them; mothers like Henna studied Islam to gain more knowledge to pass on to the next generation. Gupta (2021) argues that “motivation is an internal force. It cannot be measured in quantitative terms” (p. 1597). Henna's motivation came from Islam, which elevates the position of a woman when she becomes a mother (Rizvi, 2021). Islam was a source of empowerment and personal autonomy for this group of women, providing them with a sense of self-worth (Covington, 1984) in their role as mothers. For example, in the Hadith, it is mentioned when a man is asked who he should be kind to, the answer is “to your mother.” When asked a second time, again the answer is “to your mother,” and a third time, the answer is “to your mother.” It is only when asked a fourth time that the answer is “to your father.” The significant responsibility and respect Islam gives to the mother is also connected to *jannah* (aspiring for a place in paradise); through my research participants' belief that if they performed in a certain manner as mothers, their efforts would be rewarded in the next life.

Muslim women's piety can be understood as a form of agency (Sehlikoglu, 2018) and “ethical self-making” (Mahmood, 2011). By this I mean that piety, including knowledge seeking, leads to both internal validation and external recognition within the community. Over time, pious, knowledgeable women become sought out as sources of advice and support, with growing recognition and respect within the community.

7 | IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The voices of the women British Pakistani ESOL learners in the study are clear. They wanted to learn English, and a key motivating factor was that not being able to speak that language would impact their children's life chances. The women provided access to their religious lives and offered a different perspective. Within their Islamic faith, motherhood is a space of agency, respect, and responsibility, with a specific focus on gaining knowledge for oneself and one's children. Thus, both religion and motherhood and the intersection between the two gave motivation to the participants. A thread weaves through the women's stories about motherhood and learning English so they could help their children, as well as the importance of these roles according to Islam.

When entering an ESOL class, Muslim women often lose that confidence and self-esteem, feeling alienated in a new environment. Educators must find ways to sustain their confidence in the classroom. For example, one of the local organisations working with women ESOL learners described how they worked from an Islamic perspective to empower and engage women in learning.

We looked at bringing the women out through faith. In the Quran, it says, "You are never too old to learn." Islam encourages the gaining of knowledge. I use Islam as a vehicle to reach these women and talk to their families. I set up a prayer group as a vehicle to get the women to come and build their interest. For me, it was getting their interest and motivation, choosing something they really wanted, and knowing what rights they have under Islam.

(Learning support organisation, Manager, May 2018)

Educators and others who support English language learners should keep an open mind, as statements by politicians do not always reflect the realities of Muslim women's lives in contemporary Britain. Muslim women have the right in Islam to educate themselves and seek knowledge and it is obligatory for both men and women. "Islam encourages its followers to enlighten themselves with the knowledge of their religion as well as other branches of knowledge" (Jawad, 1998, p. 16). All the women in this study were aware of their rights in Islam and felt empowered and relied on the Islamic texts to advocate their right to seek knowledge and to access ESOL and other forms of learning.

While the women learned English at the organisation quoted above, they also increased Islamic knowledge of women's rights, delivered from a woman's perspective rather than by male imams. This involved, for example, revisiting the original texts of the Quran and the Hadith and discussing the interpretations as they pertain to childhood, knowledge, and the role of the mother. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said: "Seeking knowledge is an obligation for every Muslim" (Muneer, 2014, p. 10). Today, women learners are part of the production of Islamic knowledge in their community and share that knowledge to empower each other.

Learner identities impact classroom practices (Richards, 2021). Cooke (2006) argues that "knowing more about learners and their 'various worlds and experiences' helps us understand which factors influence their English language learning" (p. 57) to shape a relevant pedagogy. Therefore, ESOL teachers have a role to play in supporting the motives involved in forming identities and making learning relevant. Teachers need to understand what motivates their learners, since what motivates them may not be what is taught in English language classes (Badwan, 2017), creating a disconnect between their aspirations and motivation and the curriculum delivered. Badwan (2017) mentions

the divide between second language learners' "ideal selves" and "real selves" (p. 196). Education is a powerful tool to raise the aspirations of women like the research participants to be their "best selves."

When women from former British colonies in South Asia arrive in England, there is a heightened expectation that they learn the English language and integrate into British society. Neelam (2022) argues that the politicisation of Muslims in the West means they are under increased scrutiny: "Muslim women ... are made hyper-visible" (p. 27) and "depicted as victims of violence and oppression" (p. 25) and living parallel lives (Cantle, 2001). Muslim women are showered with Western empathy without real knowledge of their lives. One organisation, which was set up in the 1980s and has supported women language learners for 40 years, strongly advocates that women want to learn English and are motivated:

Women are motivated and want to learn English. I don't agree with what politicians say: that minority women don't want to learn English or integrate. If you show respect to them and have a tutor who is not criticising them, it builds their confidence and trust. We had 40 to 50 women coming here a week, and they were motivated to learn.

(Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic [BAME] training organisation manager, April 2018)

Muslim women are among the most scrutinised groups of ESOL learners; the English language has become a tool to subjugate them, with little understanding of what motivates them. Negative stereotypes follow them into English language classes. Thus, it is crucial for educators to go beyond seeing women like my research participants as just ESOL students; they are mothers, religious beings, and have lived knowledge. We must not look at Muslim women's lives through a white gaze (Pailey, 2020). Educators have an ethical duty to understand more about the lives of British Pakistani Muslim women, which are oversimplified by the dichotomy of victimhood and the need for Western intervention to liberate docile bodies (Foucault, 1979).

According to Noormohamed (2008), new identities for Muslim women are emerging as educated and politically engaged. Lieblich et al. (1998) argue that "stories provide coherence and consistency to one's experience" (p. 7). The stories the women in this study shared challenge outdated labels and stereotypes and illuminate identities and roles that empower them. In particular, the consistent message was that motivation comes partly down to their roles as mothers, and that this role of motherhood is highlighted through an Islamic lens. Badwan (2018) argues that "classrooms are complex meeting places where identities and needs are co-constructed" (p. 4) and it is necessary to be flexible to meet the needs of learners. ESOL teachers should acknowledge the variety of their students' world views, life experiences, histories, identities, values, and beliefs to achieve better outcomes that meet the expectations of their learners, who may also be mothers.

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