

Islam Today

Written Assessment n. 4

Discuss the impact of Islam during the past forty years in the United Kingdom.

The presence of Muslims in the United Kingdom has a long history and dates back to the 16th century, with the development of the first communities starting in the late 1900s¹. Nonetheless, the largest number of Muslims arrived in the United Kingdom after the war from Pakistan, Bangladesh and India. They went to occupy specific niches on the labour market in the industrial cities of London, the Midlands, Yorkshire and Lancashire². Although today most Muslims in the country come from Pakistan and Bangladesh (representing nearly two-thirds of all Muslims in the UK)³, there is a great heterogeneity both in terms of national origins and the different confessions and declinations of Islam⁴. Islam is the second-largest religion in the UK by the number of followers⁵, representing almost 3% of the population⁶. However, what characterizes Muslims in the UK, is the different demographic profile compared to the rest of the population. They are younger. 20% of the total population are between 0-15, a third of this age group are Muslims, and less than 10% are aged 60 or over⁷.

The Islamic presence in the West has historically been characterized by profound exchanges and contaminations, but also mistrust and clashes⁸. Similarly, having to assess the impact of the Islamic presence in the United Kingdom over the last 40 years, we can argue that some events have irreversibly marked the life of Muslims in the country. From the late 1980s (1989) onwards, a series of national and international events marked the future of Muslims in the United Kingdom. The reaction to Salman Rushdie's book "The Satanic Verses" and the Gulf War means that Muslims in the United Kingdom are called to make their voices heard, emerging from the almost invisibility that had marked the first phases of integration, in which the will to assimilate was a priority⁹. In this period, the first Muslim media began to emerge, which had the main aim of conveying alternative information from the mainstream narrative and giving a voice to the Muslim community, a phenomenon that will grow in importance in the following

¹ Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats, <https://crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/british-muslims-full-report/>.

² Peach, C. (2005). Britain's Muslim Population: an Overview. In T. Abbas (Ed.). *Muslim Britain. Communities under pressure*. Zed Books.

³ Abbas, T. (Ed.). (2005). *Muslim Britain. Communities under pressure*. Zed Books.

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ Peach, C. (2005). Britain's Muslim Population: an Overview. In T. Abbas (Ed.). *Muslim Britain. Communities under pressure*. Zed Books.

⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ Cardini, F. (2007). *Europa e Islam. Storia di un malinteso*. Edizioni Laterza.

⁹ Marranci, G. (2005). Pakistanis in Northern Ireland in the Aftermath of September 11. In T. Abbas (Ed.). *Muslim Britain. Communities under pressure*. Zed Books.

decade¹⁰. These are the decades in which the second generations, more aware of their rights and their place in society, began to claim the recognition of their cultural and religious specificity in every area of society, for example, in education. It was in 1998 that for the first time, two Islamic schools - Islamia Primary School in Brent and Al-Furqan School in Birmingham - were funded by the state¹¹.

However, it will be the year 2001 to irreversibly mark a change in the life of Muslims in the United Kingdom and abroad. Not only for 11 September, an event that affected the lives of Muslims all over the world but also for the 'riots' that took place in Bradford, Burnley and Oldham, involving Muslims – mostly Pakistani and Bangladeshi – “in response to mobilisations by the neo-fascist British National Party (BNP)”¹². A few months after the unrest that occurred in spring and summer, we will see the life of all Muslims marred by the 9/11 attack. From now on, Muslims in all Western countries, including the United Kingdom, will be subjected to more forms of discrimination, racism and direct violence than ever before. It will be especially those who bear the signs of their diversity in their bodies, especially veiled women who will suffer the most intimidation and exclusion. This exclusion involves every area of life, including education. “In particular, Muslim girls have not only been excluded from schools because they wanted to wear headscarves (Anwar and Shah 2000 cited in Anwar 2005, 33) but have been victims of stereotyping, including an expectation of underachievement”¹³ (p.4).

Nevertheless, not for this, they will give up wearing the veil; on the contrary, it seems that the latter has increasingly become a symbol of identity adhesion and protest by the new generations against discrimination by non-Muslims and prejudices towards Islam. “All the Muslim young women interviewed after 2001 expressed their identity as Muslim in the first instance and they had begun taking more interest in their religion, with a number choosing to adopt the hijab despite the problems this brought for them in terms of prejudice and discrimination”¹⁴ (p.3).

This sort of "emancipation" from the Western version of feminism, often conceived as universal, is not only challenged in everyday life by individual women but also by women's and feminist movements that bear the mark of Islam.

In order to challenge the construction of the inferiority of Muslim women from the West, the so-called “Islamic feminisms”, label in which not all the supporters of women's movements recognize themselves, all over the world – from Morocco to Iran, from Malaysia to Turkey, up to the United States and the United Kingdom – are fighting for the recognition of the rights and equals opportunities of women. “Historically, the origins of feminism in the world of Islam date back to the beginning of the last century, when the first activists appeared in the limelight, in Egypt (Hoda Sha'rawi), Turkey (Halide Edib Adivar), Iran (Taj os-Soltaneh) and India (Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain), advocating ideas that partly echoed those launched by the Western sisters: equal rights in the area family, full access to education and voting. Often, then, they accompanied their protests with sensational one's gestures of break with local tradition, such as

¹⁰ Sameera Ahmed, T. (2005). Reading between the Lines: Muslims and the Media. In T. Abbas (Ed.). *Muslim Britain. Communities under pressure*. Zed Books.

¹¹ Osler, A. & Hussain, Z. (2005). Educating Muslim Girls: Do Mothers Have Faith in the State Sector? In T. Abbas (Ed.). *Muslim Britain. Communities under pressure*. Zed Books.

¹² Bagguley, P. & Hussain, Y. (2005). Flying the Flag for England? Citizenship, Religion and Cultural Identity among British Pakistani Muslims. In T. Abbas (Ed.). *Muslim Britain. Communities under pressure*. Zed Books.

¹³ McKenna, U. & Francis, L.J. (2019). Growing up female and Muslim in the UK: an empirical enquiry into the distinctive religious and social values of young Muslims. *British Journal of Religious Education*. n, 41:4, 388-4.

¹⁴ Ibidem.

that of public disclosure”¹⁵ (p.11). These movements clearly differ from Western ones in that they do not consider the religious sphere an obstacle to women's emancipation. On the contrary, these women start from the Islamic religion, affirming that Islam offers women all the guarantees they need, supporting equality and equality between the sexes. It was men, who historically hold the power of exegesis of the sacred texts, that have interpreted the principles of Islam in a misogynist way, precisely to exclude women from the public sphere and relegate them to the private sphere. Such awareness has seen many women who previously supported secular feminism closer to the western one recover their faith and be protagonists of autochthonous feminism that aims to re-read and reinterpret the principles of religion from a gender perspective to highlight the fallacious interpretations made by the male sex to date considered indisputable.

Although such feminine movements present great differences within them, everyone is fighting for the recognition of women's rights. The fact that it has recently established itself in Islamic countries and in immigration countries, does not exclude the coexistence of other types of feminism, including that of a secular matrix. “The women's movement operating within an Islamic framework does not replace gender activism of women who act outside of religious references, but goes hand in hand with this, contributing to diversify the landscape of struggles for gender equality within the Islamic world”¹⁶ (p.70).

The analysis of the various forms of gender activism in the Islamic world, as well as in the countries of the diaspora, is of extreme interest. In the United Kingdom, for example, it was Amina Wadud, one of the protagonists of Islamic feminism, who for the first time filled the role of Imam and led mixed prayers in the mosque at the Muslim Educational Centre in Oxford in 2008¹⁷. Amina, an African-American convert and US-based professor, was followed by Raheel Raza, who led prayers at the same centre in 2010. Other initiatives will follow, for example, the Inclusive Mosque Initiative in 2012, in London, whose “grassroots activist organization works to promote understanding of an intersectional feminist Islam”¹⁸.

These phenomena involve not only Western Muslims and Muslims in general but Western countries themselves. They not only manage to demystify the “paternalistic feminism”¹⁹ of Western women towards Muslim women, teaching them to practice a conscious and committed relativist posture, but they also redefine identities, deconstructing the exclusionary vision that has dominated European and Western societies – the United Kingdom included – in the knowledge that in-between²⁰ identities represent a reality that cannot be ignored anymore.

¹⁵ Vanzan, A. (2013). *Le donne di Allah. Viaggio nei femminismi islamici*. Mondadori.

¹⁶ Pepicelli, R. (2010). *Femminismo islamico. Corano, diritti, riforme*. Carocci.

¹⁷ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2021/02/04/muslim-council-britains-first-female-leader-wont-question-lack/>

¹⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁹ Muaygil, R.A. (2018). From Paternalistic to Patronizing: How Cultural Competence Can Be Ethically Problematic. *HEC Forum* 30, 13–29.

²⁰ Cohen, J. A., & Kassan, A. (2018). Being in-between: A model of cultural identity negotiation for emerging adult immigrants. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 65(2), 133–154.

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