Islamophobia and the Muslim student

Disciplining the intellect

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Introduction

Islamophobia is a socio-psychological phenomenon, a form of discrimination and racialization (Meer and Modood 2010; Sayyid 2010) that not only demonizes, dehumanizes and securitizes (Croft 2012) entire Muslim communities, but is also internalized by Muslims, conscious of how their identity is (re)presented in the social and political imagination. It is not simply an “irrational fear” as a phobia, but rather is rationalized through political and media discourse where the Muslim subject is in a perpetual state of “vulnerability” to what is problematically termed “Islamist” extremism, “at risk” of being radicalized, ergo a potential threat. Muslim men in this context pose a direct physical threat whereas Muslim women fluctuate between the “vulnerable fanatic”: vulnerable in their need to be saved from a primitive religious belief system, and a fanatic posing an ideological threat to a progressive British way of life, and a physical threat by being hidden in plain sight behind a veil. In essence the mundane existence of Muslims in Britain has been securitized with Islamophobia increasingly becoming a part of the “British social psyche” (Abbas in press; Saeed 2016).

Educational institutions such as schools and universities have also been drawn into the security agenda. The British counter terrorism strategy CONTEST has adopted a four-pronged approach against terrorism that includes “Prevent” which aims at “Preventing Violent Extremism”. Universities and other educational institutions have been implicated as spaces where such radicalization may exist, and therefore can be challenged. Under the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015 (HM Government 2015; hereafter CTSA 2015), a statutory duty has been imposed on educational institutions to report any student who may show signs of vulnerability towards radicalization in the interest of “safeguarding” students. This chapter draws on Muslim student experiences of Islamophobia and the counter terrorism agenda in universities highlighting how the intersection between (in)security and the Muslim identity has resulted in the normalization of Islamophobia. Drawing on a narrative study of forty Muslim female university students and graduates conducted in 2010–2012 when the Muslim student threat dominated media and political rhetoric after the arrest of individuals such as Umar Farouq Abdulmutalib and Roshonora Choudhry, along with recent reports of Islamophobia in educational institutions, this chapter illustrates how Muslim students are engaged in a process of self-censorship and
self-regulation that makes Islamophobia more dangerous, a socio-psychological phenomenon that has become commonplace in the UK, propelled by the existing security agenda.

**Locating the Muslim student suspect**

In contextualizing the experiences of Muslim students today, the historical location of Muslims and Islam within the university needs to be examined. Siddiqui (2007) argues that “[i]nterest in Islam and the Middle East” for instance has been documented since the “reign of Henry II in the twelfth century.” Academic interest was evident in “the establishment of Chairs in Arabic in Cambridge in 1632 and in Oxford four years later” (ibid., p. 561). Edward Said (2003) in his work on Orientalism highlights in detail the nature of such scholarship within the centres of the colonial Empires, informed by a colonial ideal that reinforced the barbarity of non-European civilizations thereby legitimizing the colonial mission. Such scholarship continued to be supported by the British state in its efforts to sustain its colonial rule. For instance, the Reay Report 1909, the Scarbrough Report 1947, the Hayter Report 1961 and the Parker Report 1986 (Siddiqui 2007) systematically outlined the role of higher educational institutions in supporting the colonial Empire and after its collapse the British government’s interests abroad. Albert Hourani (1984) provides an overview of the first three reports highlighting how they reflect the changing nature of British influence abroad. The Reay Report was written during colonial rule:

> There is little sense, in the Reay Report, of any interchange of cultures; of any idea that by studying Arabic or Chinese and the cultures connected with it one can do more than acquire a useful skill and can enrich oneself. There is even a certain contempt implied in such phrases as those about “the peculiar notions and prejudices of Oriental peoples”.

*(Hourani 1984, p. 112)*

When we come to the Scarbrough Report, the age of empire is, in fact, ending . . . what had been questions of colonial rule were becoming questions of international diplomacy, but if that diplomacy were carried on with knowledge, skill and sensitivity, Britain could still have a position of influence . . . Thus the point from which the report starts is that “cooperation between nations is the basis of world-peace and future prosperity”; a nation which does not possess a sound foundation of scholarship is ill-equipped to deal with world-affairs.

*(Hourani 1984, p. 112)*

The Scarbrough Report is also cognizant of the changing world order, with Britain falling behind because of its largely “insular policies”.

> The Hayter Report came out not very long after the Scarbrough Report – fifteen years only – but it was aware that things had changed . . . The colonial empires had dissolved into independent states, and the world was more competitive than before, but the British educational system has not kept pace with this: “so far as it considers any area outside the United Kingdom, it still seems able only to see western Europe, with an occasional bow to North America and the Commonwealth”.

*(Hourani 1984, p. 112)*

While these three reports were instrumental in promoting the establishment of Oriental and Area studies, that began with a focus on learning languages to a recognition of the need for a
cross disciplinary approach to further Britain’s interests in a changing global order, the Parker report (1986) highlighted the limitations of the existing programs and the need for a comprehensive national policy that would emphasize linguistic development to support Britain’s diplomatic endeavours:

Given (a) that successive governments have seen it as in the country’s interests to maintain a global foreign policy and (b) that British exports are now 30 per cent of GDP as against 20 per cent twenty years ago, it is argued that British chances of success, commercial and diplomatic, in Asia and Africa are significantly increased if our business and diplomatic representatives are able to appreciate and work within their local subtleties. Language and area studies are an all-important means to that end: I believe that the sharper our gift of tongues the sharper our competitive edge . . .

(Latham 1986, p. 4)

The learning of languages that the Parker report recommended, “the sharper” the “tongue” the greater Britain’s “competitive edge” meant that Oriental and Area Studies programmes continued with their legacy of supporting the British Foreign Office and diplomats abroad. However, this did not imply that academic scholarship beyond interests of diplomacy was absent. One of the criticisms raised by the Parker report, which also quoted the Ministry of Defence, was the impractical nature of scholarship that was being produced by such programs urging universities to focus on more practical approaches to learning languages for the purpose of supporting Britain’s foreign interests (see Latham 1986). To a large extent the teaching and learning about Islam was also located within this Orientalist framework, which continued to be linked with learning Arabic, and promoting the idea of a monolithic Islam.

It is also in this context that one can locate the entry of the Commonwealth immigrant. Overseas Muslim students had studied in British universities before, but the social dynamics within Britain changed after the collapse of the British Empire and the entry of immigrants from the Commonwealth in the 1940s and 1950s. For the Muslim population, according to Ahsan (1994, p. 340) their “presence in Britain” could be documented as early as the 1850s with the arrival of sailors that settled in “coastal areas such as Liverpool, Cardiff, Bristol, London and Tyneside” (see also Solomos 2003). However, it was in the 1940s, especially after the British Nationality Act 1948 that provided “the status of British citizens” to subjects from the Commonwealth (albeit with a “comprehensive classification” of this citizenship), that the ethnic and racial composition of the British population gradually started to change (Julios 2008, p. 86). With the UK assuming a “leadership” role in the “British Commonwealth of Nations” after the collapse of the Empire, the influx of Commonwealth immigrants continued, with backlash in the form of race riots from the locals (Spencer 1997, pp. 82, 43–44). The 1960s witnessed policies from the British government that restricted the entrance of immigrants, however simultaneously pieces of legislation such as the 1965 Race Relations Act and the Race Relations Act 1968 was also introduced to protect immigrants who were now citizens of Britain (see Layton-Henry 1992; Julios 2008). The entry of Commonwealth immigrants therefore physically changed the characteristics of a predominantly “white” Britain.

Such changes in demographics were not immediately reflected in effective access to jobs or educational institutions. Modood (2004) highlights the presence of “structural disadvantages” that minorities faced, including in education (see also Modood and Berthoud 1997). Inequality in relation to class already existed in the UK. This was evident in the continued disparity that was witnessed across educational institutions. The Robbin Report 1963 highlighted this
disparity and “formalized” the idea “that exclusive forms of access to the country’s universities were incompatible with the meritocratic regime of the mid-twentieth century” (see Ross 2005, p. 22). While the composition of the student body in higher education was becoming more diverse (though this was not reflected in the Oxford-Cambridge context), particularly in the post war period, with new universities being established, there continued to be disparity in relation to quality and access. The 1985 Education for All Report (also known as the Swann Report) highlighted the nature of racism and discrimination that contributed to the under-performance of students from “ethnic minority” backgrounds (see Swann 1985, p. 768). In relation to religion, the report outlined the importance of addressing the religious needs of all students. For instance, in the case of Muslims, the report recommended that “the ‘pastoral’ needs of Muslim pupils” be met “to ensure that there is a real respect and understanding by both teachers and parents of each others concerns and that the demands of the school place no child in fundamental conflict with the requirements of his faith” (ibid., pp. 773–774). The report was important in igniting “a high profile academic debate concerning the relative merits of multicultural and antiracist education” (Modood and May 2001, p. 308). There was increasing awareness of institutionalized racism and discrimination across different social institutions yet government policies especially under the Tories seldom addressed such issues adequately.

The place of the Muslim identity in Britain’s socio-political discourse became more prominent after the “Rushdie affair” in the 1980s. Salman Rushdie was accused of blasphemy for his book *The Satanic Verses*, with the Iranian supreme leader Ayottullah Khomeini issuing a religious edict or *fatwa* calling for his death (Saeed 2016, p. 28). The Muslim communities in Britain had been visibly practising their religion even before the Rushdie affair, but they were often recognized more in relation to their ethnicity rather than their religion (Tyrer 2003), but this particular event was important in “‘politicizing’ the Muslim identity” (see Saeed 2016, pp. 28–29; Addison 2010). It further created the impression that British Muslims were responding to the call of an Iranian religious leader against a fellow British citizen.² This perception also reinforced a monolithic stereotype of a British Muslim, once again erasing the diversity of religiosity, ethnicity, class, or sect from this category. What was overlooked, as Tyrer (2003) argues, is an increasing frustration from the Muslim community about discrimination and Islamophobia that the British state was refusing to recognize, a frustration that predates the Rushdie protests. Muslims were perceived to be “fundamentalists” and this image informed their experiences in the university.

Tyrer (2003) in his work on institutionalized Islamophobia in universities highlights the problematic place of the “fundamentalist Muslim” and the constant negotiations that took place between Muslim and non-Muslim students, Muslim students and the university administration, Islamic student societies (ISocs) and the National Union of Students (NUS) for the right of Muslim students to practise their religious beliefs on university campuses. The fear of Muslim students being targeted by what were considered extremist groups such as Al Muhajiroun and Hizb-ut-Tahrir was a constant source of concern for the government and the university administration. Nabi (2011) in her doctoral work further highlights the impact of the 1998 *Extremism and Intolerance on Campus* report, and the introduction of “Campus Watch” that continued to locate Muslim students as “fundamentalists” or in danger of being recruited by “Islamist” fundamentalists.

The tragedies of 9/11 and 7/7 further securitized the Muslim student identity as a “would be” terrorist. The 7 July 2005 terrorist attack included “home grown” terrorists among whom were individuals who had been educated in universities and colleges in the UK. In 2006, the youngest Muslim, a sixteen-year-old was convicted under the Terrorism Act for possessing “information about bomb making material” and “hidden notes” on “martyrdom”
(Miah 2012). In 2009 Umar Farouq Abdulmutallab was arrested for attempting to blow up a plane headed to the US; on further investigation he was found to be the alumnus of a university in London, and the former president of its ISoc (BBC News 2011). Educated Muslim women were also being flagged for their involvement in extremist and terrorist attacks: the “lyrical terrorist”, Samina Malik was convicted under the Terrorism Act 2000 in 2007 for “possessing records likely to be useful in terrorism” and writing poetry glorifying terrorist acts (Truscott 2007; Saeed 2016, pp. 60–61); Roshonara Choudhry dropped out of university in her third year and was eventually arrested and convicted for stabbing a Member of Parliament to avenge the “people of Iraq” (BBC News 2010; Saeed 2016, p. 61); the emergence of British students fleeing to Syria to join Daesh further reinforced the idea of the dangerous Muslim student.

The assumption that these individuals had been radicalized on university campuses was merely that, an assumption without any concrete evidence to confirm such suspicions (see Kundnani 2015; Githens-Mazer 2012). Yet, under “Prevent” educational institutions became one of the sites where potential extremists could be stopped if the “signs” of radicalization could be identified by university personnel. CTSA 2015 made it a legal obligation for individuals showing such “signs” of vulnerability to be reported by universities to the authorities (HM Government 2015). Even before CTSA 2015, university officials were working with the police and security agencies to challenge radicalization or extremism within universities (see Secretary of State for the Home Office 2012, p. 8). CTSA 2015 further emphasized on the importance of upholding “British values” where signs of radicalization could be judged against these “British values”; yet the meaning of these values continues to be debated. CTSA 2015 claimed to also fight against right winged extremism, yet majority of the referrals under Prevent involved Muslim students (Home Office 2018). An NUS survey of 578 Muslim students across universities in the UK highlighted the extent to which Prevent had created an atmosphere of insecurity (NUS 2018). The survey revealed how the Prevent duty had “significantly” affected Muslim student “engagement” with student politics and activism on campus (ibid., p. 7), since they were afraid of being flagged for becoming radicalized. This also had an impact on ISoc membership, with Muslim students avoiding the student society out of fear of being considered “suspect” (NUS 2018; Saeed 2016). Such a policy clearly has repercussions for free speech and political activism in educational institutions. The House of Commons and House of Lords (2018) Joint Committee Report on Freedom of Speech in Universities has also called for an “independent review” of the Prevent strategy and its impact on free speech in universities.

Such a policy also creates greater vulnerability towards Islamophobia. Incidents of Muslim students being called terrorists or told to “go back” have increasingly become common occurrences especially in the aftermath of a terrorist attack in the UK, Europe or the US (Wightwick 2018; Milmo 2015). Such incidents are seldom reported as Muslim students often lack confidence in the system to prosecute Islamophobes (NUS 2018). This lack of confidence or trust is reinforced by cases of Muslim students who have been wrongfully suspected of radicalization: A Muslim student was questioned for reading a book on terrorism in his university library, the book was part of his graduate course at Staffordshire University (Ramesh and Halliday 2015); a student in school was questioned for using the term “eco terrorism” during a school debate on environmentalism (Dodd 2015); another student was questioned for campaigning for the Boycott Divest and Sanction movement against Israel in schools (Hooper 2015a). The nature of the questions is also troubling, that often bring up issues of terrorism or terrorist groups such as Daesh and the possibility of students having sympathies towards such groups. The number of “referrals” made under Prevent largely implicate Muslims, with 61 per cent of referrals related
to “Islamist extremism” in 2016/2017; 32 per cent of total referrals coming from the education sector where “the youngest median age” was 14 (Home Office 2018). In such a context, it is therefore not surprising that Muslim students also experience Islamophobia from fellow students and administrators, reinforcing a climate of suspicion about the Muslim student identity. While Muslim men are often more susceptible to such security surveillance, Muslim women who wear the veil or those who are members of ISocs have also shared experiences of Islamophobia and their encounters with the state’s security agenda on campuses.

The following section examines such narratives of suspicion with a focus on Muslim women through a biographical study that was conducted in 2010 to 2012 with forty British Muslim women with a Pakistani heritage and overseas Pakistani Muslim women who were studying or upon graduation working in the UK. Members of the student welfare societies and a representative of the Federation of Student Islamic Societies (FOSIS) were also interviewed. The participants were between the ages of 19 and 28, who were contacted through ISocs and Pakistani student societies (PakSocs). The author followed the ethics protocol of her university, ensuring that the participants had time to ask questions before participating in the research, and had the option of opting out of the research. Pseudonyms have been used in this paper to protect the identity of the participants in order to ensure anonymity.

Disciplining the Muslim: narratives of control and surveillance

It is really unfortunate that because of the actions of a few people every time I am in public now I can’t say certain words just like ooo I am going to explode I am angry, or stuff like that. I have to curb my vocabulary to such an extent as if I am being watched all the time. Even though I would never ever do things like that. . . but because we don’t want to be picked up by people as potential might be doing stuff, you have to change the way you speak.

(Sabahat, West Yorkshire, School Teacher)

What is considered legitimate “vocabulary” for Muslim students has changed within the security discourse that informs their day to day existence. It is in such a context that certain Muslim identities (read: moderate) are considered more tolerable than others (read: fundamentalist), where Muslims such as Sabahat are conscious of these degrees of “difference” (Tyrer 2003), thereby monitoring their own interactions, afraid of being misinterpreted or misunderstood. Such self-regulation is a deliberate and conscious act by Sabahat – changing the way she speaks is a conscious acceptance of a state of being in a context where Islamophobia is the norm. O’Donnell observes how “the concept of ‘psychic alienation’, derived originally from Fanon . . . best captures the kinds of debilitating paralysis and self-doubt that stops one from speaking for fear of how one will be heard or constituted” (O’Donnell 2016, p. 14). Such perceptions cannot be dismissed as exaggerations either when Muslim students are being reported for reading books or using certain expressions that most certainly will not be flagged had the individuals in question been non-Muslim white students. Islamophobia in its socio-psychological state reinforces this racial dichotomy.

The disciplining of the Muslim body and mind therefore becomes a deliberate act by the Muslim self, making Islamophobia more dangerous as a part of the status quo. Another expression of this self-disciplining is evident in Abbas’s (in press) work on Muslim parents and the ways in which the family unit has been securitized under Britain’s counter terrorism agenda. Parents have been encouraged to monitor children at home, who might show “signs” of vulnerability to radicalization (also see Awan and Guru 2016). As Abbas observes, “[i]nternal suspect bodies are
produced within Muslim households where Muslim parents internalise external Islamic markers such as the hijab, jilbab, and Islamic beard as signifiers of extremism, precipitating internal disciplinary measures” (Abbas in press, p. 3). In this study, participants also shared similar narratives of parents discouraging them from becoming “too religious.” A head sister of an ISoc in West Yorkshire university shared her own experience of how her parents became worried when she started taking on the hijab and jilbab, and how ISoc members complained of similar experiences at home when they started praying “tahajud” (see Saeed and Johnson 2016, p. 43). It is important to note that the students being monitored by parents in this study are university students (i.e. they are young adults). The attitude of security agencies is one of paternalistic control under the guise of student welfare, where the possibility of a “potential” terrorist act removes any benefit of doubt to be given to the individual in question. Coppock and McGovern highlight the “deeply problematic” framing of young Muslims as vulnerable, arguing that “[d]evoid of meaningful social and political agency, divorced from the structural circumstances of their lived experiences, and problematised in terms of their mental well-being, young British Muslims are thus rendered as appropriate objects for state intervention and surveillance” (Coppock and McGovern 2014, p. 242).

The perception of vulnerability to radicalization is also increasingly being associated with ISocs. University ISocs have traditionally played an important role in providing Muslim students a “safe space” to express their religious identity (see Tyrer 2003). According to the NUS Muslim student survey of 2018, for over half of the survey population ISocs still provided a “safe space” on campus, but ironically the responses of ISoc Presidents reveal the increasing pressure from the Prevent duty that has contributed to a “decline in membership due to concerns of surveillance by authorities” (NUS 2018, p. 178). Students in this study also highlighted the problems that ISocs in particular faced as a result of the Prevent duty (see Saeed and Johnson 2016). Muslim parents had started discouraging their children from joining ISocs, especially in the aftermath of the Umar Farouq Abdulmutallab case. Hafsa, who belonged to a university in the northeast of England, was convinced that her ISoc was infiltrated by a spy who was informing the university administration about their activities. Nadiya’s ISoc in West Yorkshire continued to face resistance from “middle management” whom she believed deliberately created hurdles for the ISoc such as mismanaging event bookings since they were suspicious of ISoc activities. Inviting speakers without opposition from the university was a constant battle across ISocs in different universities, a problem that all students believed that other student societies did not confront. A reason for this increased vigilance of ISoc speaker events was the belief that students were being radicalized because of these speakers, which is why they needed to be monitored. However, far from challenging the ideology or arguments of the proposed speaker, students were simply not permitted to invite any such speaker, and often ISoc members would have no choice but to concede to the administration. The complaint of ISoc members was about the manner in which such speaker events were cancelled. They complained about instances of universities refusing speakers at the last minute when all the arrangements had been made. Often the complaint was more about the way they were told off, where there was no room for debate. Such a response from universities in upholding the Prevent duty did not challenge the potential of radicalization in any way, but simply prevented the possibility of any form of intellectual debate. In practice, the Prevent duty in universities was stifling critical engagement by adopting such a paternalistic attitude towards ISocs, instead of taking the opportunity to create space for discussion. This was extremely problematic especially when ISocs were willing to engage with the university administration in order to understand why certain speakers were considered controversial and not given a platform.
Faculty at times were also implicated in biased or Islamophobic attitude towards students. As O’Donnell notes:

So many indicators can serve as potential symptoms or markers of risk, especially if one is a Muslim, that speaking freely becomes ever more difficult. Not only the student but also the teacher or lecturer must engage in constant self-scrutiny, since the implications of error are so serious in a “risk society”.

(O’Donnell 2016, p. 13)

Placing the onus of detecting signs of vulnerability to radicalization on teachers is a tremendous burden. Busher et al.’s (2017) study of “educationalists experiences” of the “Prevent duty” highlighted mixed responses when the educators in question were less experienced with the Prevent duty. With media reports highlighting incidents of students being wrongfully reported, Muslim students are less at ease with such a Prevent duty (see NUS 2018; Saeed and Johnson 2016). While such instances often came up in relation to members of ISocs, Muslim students in class also noticed a difference in behaviour. One referred to a teacher “who is really really discriminatory”:

I could tell something was off about the teacher in terms of Muslims . . . And she wouldn’t ask me questions, all other teachers would but she would divert her glance and she would be surprised if I would give sort of answer which was pro the law, and as opposed to pro what the Muslims should be thinking or doing. If I would give an answer which was pro what she was saying she would be all shocked that oh a Muslim is saying that. There was this prejudice in her head from the beginning.

(Hafsa, northeast, law student)

Hafsa was not alone in experiencing such responses from teachers. Nadiya also felt that some of her professors often looked to her when discussing topics involving Muslims or Islam, and she often took that as a challenge, and an opportunity for debate. Such incidents were more apparent with students who wore the niqab. Faiza, a student from a West Yorkshire university, faced issues with invigilators during her final exams, where in one case she was asked by a male invigilator to remove her niqab “in front of” 200 students to check for ID, while in another case she felt patronized by an invigilator who thought she could not understand English which she found especially condescending since she was taking an English exam (Saeed 2016). In all of these cases, the students did not report any of the incidents. Faiza in particular was encouraged by class fellows to report the invigilator who made her remove the niqab but she chose to ignore it, believing that this was part of “living” as a “minority.” As the FOSIS representative noted:

Islamophobia has different levels and we do acknowledge that. Large part of it is ignorance, not understanding the real principles of Islam . . . The most dangerous type is institutional, where organization or the government get away with saying things or treating particular groups of people in a way without realizing how highly offensive it is. One of our biggest challenges is of course fighting that as it has become deeply entrenched over the years.

(FOSIS representative, 2011)

The welfare officer in the context of Faiza’s university was unaware of any such Islamophobic incidents. While the lack of reporting could be considered one of the problems associated with Islamophobia being normalized in universities, universities will need to be more proactive in
making sure that such incidents are reported. For students such incidents may also be the result of ignorance or misunderstanding by people, rather than malice or hatred, which is why they are not reported, but also as the FOSIS representative highlights, there is a trust deficit:

The problem with such incident is that as a community we do feel that people might accuse us of crying wolf, being the victim so people they don’t have public support so they are not vocal about it.

(FOSIS representative, 2011)

The fear of crying wolf is reinforced by the larger media and political discourse about Muslims. This lack of reporting reflects a lack of belief in the system to address the grievances of Muslim students. This is not to suggest that students did not ever report such incidents. There were examples of students expressing confidence in their university’s ability to address Islamophobia, yet the same students were often unsure about the process of reporting such incidents. Others were put off by the bureaucratic system that made it impossible to see through a complaint. Without having the confidence in the system, or a smooth mechanism through which a complaint can be processed, there is an undercurrent of tolerance or indifference towards such Islamophobic behaviour, which has continued to persist with Islamophobia becoming normalized.

Such normalization of an Islamophobic discourse about the Muslim student identity was also evident in the way in which Muslim students controlled their intellectual interests. Even before the case of the Staffordshire University student who was reported for reading a book on terrorism, students in this study avoided certain topics for research, afraid that their work might be flagged. This was especially a concern after the case of a Masters students who was reported to the authorities for downloading the Al Qaeda manual for research that was available in book stores. The student was held in police custody despite his supervisor’s intervention proving that the manual was for research (Thornton 2011). This incident became a source of concern as the FOSIS representative noted:

Particularly when I am speaking with Muslim students who are doubting whether they should research a particular area because they think somebody is going to knock on their door and cause them grief. The hugest concern here is that Muslim students can’t practice their religion or just live as normal citizens without that fear in the same way other students might be able to.

(FOSIS representative, 2011)

This culture of surveillance has most certainly increased under Prevent, with educational institutions asked to monitor online activities of students. In schools, special software has been installed that flags the use of certain keywords (Hooper 2015b); in universities email correspondence is under surveillance with universities such as Kings College London clearly informing its users about monitoring their emails (Weale 2017). In a post Brexit context, university faculty has also been instructed to report any students who may be in violation of their study visas, with the threat of a twenty thousand pound fine placed on faculty members individually for failing to comply (Batty 2018). Faculty in such an instance becomes an appendage to the states’ security apparatus, which inevitably compromises the relationship of trust between students and their faculty. The Prevent approach by monitoring student activity has undermined the potential of educational institutions to be spaces where problematic beliefs can be challenged through intellectual debates; it further undermines the potential of progressive pedagogies (see Giroux 2005;
hooks 1994) to be employed in the classroom that are increasingly serving market forces rather than educating students as critical citizens.

Self-censorship is inevitable in a context where any expression deemed “radical” might result in students being reported to security services. This is further illustrated in the tension between the self-proclaimed moderate Muslim students against the overtly religiously and the problematically termed “fundamentalists”, especially members of the ISocs. The participants in this study belonged to different degrees of religiosity, with narratives from young women who confessed to avoiding the overtly religious Muslim students since they did not want to be misunderstood or accused of being radical. They were also honest in their account of their own biases that were challenged when they met ISoc members and were “pleasantly surprised” at the fact that they were “normal”. ISoc members often encountered such students, as Natasha observes:

But then some people who are afraid, who feel scared, they want to adopt an appearance, and want to participate in activities and want to behave in a manner which shows that they are not practising Muslims, because they feel that they will be more acceptable to their friends and class fellows and they feel more secure that nobody is going to say or do anything against them . . . there are some people who adopt all these ways just to become more acceptable for the rest of the people maybe their friends or the students whom they are with.

(Natasha, West Yorkshire, social sciences)

Natasha’s narrative highlights how this fear of being misunderstood can take on different forms. In her example the students are deliberately behaving in a certain way in order to “be more acceptable” for the non-Muslim Self that determines the level of acceptability. However, Muslim students also argued that such binaries reinforced the idea that a Muslim who “appeared” moderate was not as religious as someone who was more physically expressive of their religiosity, an idea that undermined their religiosity as British Muslims. As Aisha observes, “you don’t want to be either really,” since in both instances it is the Muslimness of the student that is being judged externally (see Brown and Saeed 2015).

Concluding discussion: Islamophobia and surveillance

Surveillance of students is increasingly becoming the norm in the twenty first century British university (see Swain 2018; Batty 2018). Muslim students in the age of surveillance are particularly at risk of being targeted under CTSA 2015 reinforcing an atmosphere of suspicion and distrust. Faculty and university administrators are being forced to become agents of the state’s security agenda within an educational institution that should be free to question and challenge all forms of ideologies yet is legally required to report any student who might be perceived to be “radical” though the “signs” of this radicalization continue to be questioned. The reporting of the student undermines the possibility of any debate or engagement, where Muslim students in particular are increasingly conscious of their speech and behaviour being placed under greater scrutiny. Such awareness has resulted in acts of self-censorship, as the preceding discussion highlights. When individuals participate in a discourse of insecurity about their identities, such participation is considered a necessity for survival and to an extent a necessity for acceptance. Such participation is a response to an Islamophobic discourse that further undermines the basic tenets of a democracy where “minority” communities are constantly under pressure to appear “normal” and not be misunderstood. It is in this act of self-censorship out of necessity that Islamophobia takes on a socio-psychological dimension.
The chapter also locates the Muslim student identity within a broader socio-political discourse of Muslims and Islam in Britain that continued to be placed within an Orientalist framework, with Islam and the Muslim identity historically found outside the physical and ideological border of Britain and Britishness (Croft 2012; Sayyid 2010). The suspect status of the Muslim today is informed by this historical reality of Orientalism. The place of Islam and the Muslim student within the British university was also historically located beyond the colonial centre, which for the state was only to be studied for the express purpose of furthering Britain’s Imperialist and post-colonial diplomatic agenda. The entrance of the Commonwealth immigrant into the UK, and the eventual place of Commonwealth and Muslim students within educational institutions is marred by structural racism and the fight to realize Britain’s multicultural identity. However, in the era of a Conservative “muscular liberalism” the place of Muslims in the UK and in the British university continues to be fraught with tensions where monitoring and surveillance of students (predominantly Muslim) is promoted as a legal necessity in the fight against terrorism, normalizing an Islamophobic discourse about Muslim student identity in the modern university.

Notes
1 See the Commonwealth Immigration Act of 1962.
2 Ironically as Modood (1990) highlights Muslims who took part in the protests were predominantly of a Sunni Pakistani heritage, rather than Shi‘ite Iranian.
3 ‘Prayer said late at night’ (Saeed and Johnson 2016, p. 49).
4 See also Saeed and Johnson (2016, p. 44).

References


