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CONTESTED VOICES:
SECULAR MUSLIM WOMEN ACTIVISTS IN THE AGE OF ISIS

Hind Elhinnawy

A dissertation submitted to the
School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research

In Requirement for
the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

University of Kent
July 2020

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For ***Leena***

Who's been benevolently eating my burned food so I can write this thesis

And for ***Mom, Dad*** *and* ***Mizo,*** *for without them, I wouldn't have accomplished this work!*

DECLARATION

I, **Hind Elhinnawy**, declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

"CONTESTED VOICES: Secular Muslim Women Activists in the Age of ISIS"

I confirm that:

1- This work was done wholly while in candidature for a degree of doctor of philosophy at the University of Kent in Canterbury;

2- Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;

3- Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given.

4- With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;

5- I have acknowledged all main sources of help;

6- None of this work has been published before submission;

7- This dissertation is no more than 99,000 words in length including quotes, tables, figures, bibliography, references and footnotes.

Signed: ....

Date: ....28/07/2020....................

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ABSTRACT

At the heart of this thesis are two organizations; *Inspire* in Britain and *Brigade de Mères* in France, battling Islamic fundamentalism and gender inequality; and five life stories of 'secular' Muslim women working alongside them. While these women are widely recognized and celebrated among 'elite' circles in the west, they have been largely dismissed by postcolonial feminist scholarship as uncritical mouthpieces for their respective states 'anti-ISIS' agenda. Despite the controversy surrounding these women, this thesis is an attempt to fully engage with such voices rather than avoiding or dismissing them. Its main aim is to examine the challenges and complexities of their engagement in activism, the ways in which discourses of race, gender, religion and ideology have shaped the terms of this engagement and their efforts to make their narratives intelligible to themselves and to others. Data was collected through ethnographic involvement; narratively-informed life story interviews, semi-structured qualitative interviews and documents, and reflexively interpreted using narrative methods. The first section examines the work undertaken by the latter two organizations. The second draws on narrative analysis to explore life stories and journeys to activism. The third explores the ways these women position themselves, their politics and their work within the wider socio-political and historical contexts they are embedded in. The final section investigates the narratives these women draw on when talking about their activism and the circumstances under which these narratives were constructed. In light of the geopolitical factors at play since the early 2000s; 9/11 and the subsequent 'War on Terror,' the emergence of ISIS, the crisis of national identity and the rise of right-wing politics, the narratives of these women reveal contradictory pressures. Islamic fundamentalists see the activism of these women as a western imperialist project that does not engage with the reality of Muslim women. Postcolonial feminists valorise 'religious' agency as an indigenous alternative to western secularism, and therefore dismiss their efforts. Neo-orientalists continue to position them as the 'other.' And in the name of respect and tolerance of 'other' cultures, sections of the left see them as Islamophobes. In reality, it seems that these ideological poles instrumentalize Muslim women's emancipation for the sake of attacking each other while allowing little discursive space for women themselves to articulate their positions. Intrinsically, this thesis aspires to map a 'complex' image of Muslim women's activism that encourages alternatives and bridges the current binary constructions of Muslim women as either victimized or fully liberated.

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GLOSSARY

Ahmadi Muslims Officially the *Ahmadiyya* Muslim Community, is an Islamic revival or messianic movement founded in *Punjab*, British India in the late 19th century. It originated with the teachings of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, who claimed to have been divinely appointed as both the promised *Mahdi* (the chosen one) and *Messiah* expected by Muslims to appear toward the end of times and bring about, by peaceful means, the final triumph of Islam. *Ahmadis* have been considered heretics and non-Muslim and subjected to persecution and systematic, sometimes state-sanctioned, oppression.

Awrah A term used within Islam to denote the intimate parts of the body, for both men and women, which must be covered with clothing. Exposing the *awrah* is unlawful in Islam and is regarded as a sin. The *awrah* of a man refers to the part of the body between the navel and the knees which must be covered when in public and during prayer. But, the exact definition of a woman's *awrah* varies among different schools of Islamic thought between covering the body except for the head, feet and hands and covering the whole body including the head, feet and hands.

Banlieue A French world that means a disadvantaged inner-city area, with roughly the same meaning as *cité*. While the term translates literally as 'suburb' it is often more accurately equated with the term 'ghetto': underprivileged, state-subsidized housing estates on the outskirts of major cities in France.

Barelvi A movement that follows the *Sunni* school of Jurisprudence, with over 200 million followers in South Asia. For the *Barelvis* (mostly from the Pakistan province of *Punjab*) the Prophet is a superhuman figure whose presence is all around us at all times.

Burqa' It is the most concealing of all Islamic veils. It is a one-piece veil that covers the face and body, often leaving just a mesh screen to see through.

Deobandi It is a revivalist movement within *Sunni* Islam. It exists in India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, South Africa, with a current presence in the UK. Its name derives from Deoband, India, where its school is situated. The *Deobandis* argue that the prophet was the *insan-i-kamil* (perfect human), but still only a man, a mortal.

Dupatta A Shawl-like scarf worn as a piece of essential clothing in the Indian subcontinent.

Eid An Arabic word for 'celebration.' It is, however, particularly used for two major celebrations in the Muslim world. *Eid Al Fitr*, also known as the 'smaller' *Eid* and determined by the confirmed sight of the new moon, is a signifier and a celebration of the final breaking of the fast at the end of the holy month of *Ramadan*. *Eid*

Al Adha (Bairam), which means 'Festival of Sacrifice' and occurs two months after *Eid Al Fitr* in which Muslims sacrifice animals for the sake of *Allah*. The date of *Eid Al Adha* also varies in accordance with the Islamic lunar calendar, falling on the tenth day of *Dhul Hijjah*. It marks the end of *Hajj* (pilgrimage), the annual pilgrimage to the holy places Saudi Arabia.

Fatwa A nonbinding legal opinion on a point of *Shari'a* given by a qualified jurist in response to a question posed by a private individual, judge or government. The jurist issuing fatwas is called a *mufti*.

Fiqh Often described as the human understanding of the *Shari'a*. *Fiqh* expands and develops *Shari'a* through the interpretation of the *Qur'an* and *Hadith and* is implemented by the rulings of jurists on questions presented to them. Thus, whereas *Shari'a* is considered unchallengeable and trustworthy by Muslims, *fiqh* is considered fallible and changeable.

Haik A traditional women's garment worn in Algeria region. It is similar to the *niqab*, although it is usually white. It consists of a rectangular fabric covering the whole body, rolled up then held at the waist by a belt and then brought back to the shoulders to be fixed by a brooch or clasp.

Haram An Arabic term meaning 'sinful,' often in reference to an act forbidden in Islam.

Hijab An Arabic word meaning barrier or partition. In Islam, the term is widely used to refer to the head covering that many Muslim women wear. Popular schools of Islamic thought assert that Muslim women are required to wear it in front of any man they could theoretically marry.

Hijra Also spelt *Hejra* or *Hijrah* ('Migration' or 'Emigration'), denotes the prophet Muhammed's migration, 622 CE, from Mecca to Medina escaping persecution. The date represents the starting point of the Muslim calendar. The most-honoured *muhajirun* (emigrants), considered among those known as the companions of the prophet who emigrated with Muhammed to Medina. From then on, the term denoted a 'migration' for the sake of *Allah* from the land of *shirk* (idolatry) to the land of Islam, as the Muslims moved from Mecca to Medina because it had become the city of Islam after its people pledged their allegiance to the Prophet.

Iftar Arabic for Breakfast. It is the evening meal with which Muslims end their daily Ramadan fast at sunset. This is the second meal of the day; the daily fast during Ramadan begins immediately after the pre-dawn meal of *Suhur* and continues during the daylight hours, ending with sunset with the evening meal of *Iftar*.

Iman An Islamic leadership position, commonly used as the title of a worship leader of a mosque and community, who leads prayers

and provides religious guidance among *Sunni* Muslims. For *Shi'a*, *imams* are leaders of the *Umma* (Islamic community) after the Prophet.

Jilbab A term that refers to any long and loose-fit coat or garment worn by some Muslim women. The modern *jilbab* covers the entire body, except for the hands, face and head. The head and neck are then covered by a scarf or a *hijab*. Some women will also cover the hands and face.

Jihad The literal meaning of the word in the Arabic language is struggle or effort. Muslims at large use it to describe three different meanings; a believer's internal struggle to live out the Muslim faith 'as well as possible;' a struggle to build a good Muslim society, and; broadly used by fundamentalists, signifying a holy war, a struggle to defend Islam. With the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, the term and its relevance for modern-day Muslims became highly contested.

Jum'ah Friday is called *al-Jum'ah* in Arabic, meaning the Day of assembly. Muslims gather for congregational worship during the Friday midday prayer. *Jum'ah* is not a 'sabbath' on which no work is done; rather, Muslims take just enough time off from work or school to attend a service at a neighbourhood mosque.

Khadi A hand-woven natural fibre cloth originating from eastern regions of the Indian subcontinent, mainly Eastern India, North-eastern India and Bangladesh, but are now broadly used in Pakistan and throughout India.

Laïcité In France, it represents a set of social and cultural values which have profound historical resonances for many French people. Olivier Roy (2007) defines it as a philosophy, a political principle and a legislative tool. But the concept is far more complex than it might appear. *Laïcité* was fully developed under the Third Republic, with the 1905 law that separates the state and the church, and it continues to govern the relations between the two until the present day.

Niqāb A black veil worn by some Muslim women in public, covering all of the face apart from the eyes. According to the majority of Muslim scholars, face veiling is not a requirement of Islam. But a minority assert that women are required to cover their face in public. Those Muslim women who wear the niqab, do so in places where they may encounter men who are not related to them.

Purdah A custom practiced in some Muslim and Hindu societies in which women either remain in a special part of the house or cover their faces and bodies to avoid being seen by men who are not related to them.

Sati (*Su-thi or Suttee*) The traditional Hindu practice of a widow immolating herself on her husband's funeral pyre.

The *sati* tradition was prevalent among certain sects of the society in ancient India, who either took the vow or deemed it a great honour to die on the funeral pyres of their husbands.

Shari'a An Arabic term that refers to wide-ranging moral and broad ethical principles drawn from the *Qur'an* and the *Hadith* (practices and sayings of Prophet Muhammad). These broad principles are interpreted by jurists who come up with specific legal rulings and moral prescriptions. These legal rulings that emerge from the interpretation of *Shari'a* law is commonly referred to as *Fiqh* (see above).

Shi'ism The second largest branch of Islam, the *Shi'i*, also known as *Shi'ite* Islam, is guided by the wisdom of Muhammad's descendants, but through his son-in-law Ali. One major difference between *Shi'i* and *Sunni* Islam is that they disagree on who should have succeeded the Prophet. Another major difference is that *Shi'i* Muslims believe that the *Imam* is sinless by nature and that his authority is infallible because it comes directly from God. Therefore, they often venerate the *Imams* as saints. While *Sunni* Muslims counter that there is no basis in Islam for a hereditary privileged class of spiritual leaders and certainly no basis for the veneration or intercession of saints.

Sufism Known in the Muslim world as Islamic mysticism. It is not a sect like *Sunni* and *Shi'i*; it is more accurately defined as an aspect or dimension of Islam. Although *Sufis* are relatively few in number, they have shaped Islamic thought and history, contributing hugely to Islamic literature. *Sufism* is a method of practice in which Muslims seek to find the truth of divine love and knowledge through direct personal experience of God.

Sunni The largest branch of the Muslim community. The name is derived from the *Sunnah*, the exemplary behaviour of the Prophet Muhammed. *Sunni* life is guided by four schools of legal thought—*Hanafi*, *Maliki*, *Shafi'i* and *Hanbali*—each of which strives to develop practical applications of revelation and the Prophet's example.

Umma Sometimes spelled *Ummah*, is an Arabic word that is usually translated into English as 'nation.' However, *Umma* does not only define a group of people with common ancestry or in the same geographical region; it also means the Islamic community, seen by many Muslims as a community without borders united 'under the guidance of the one God.'

Urfi An Arabic word which means custom, convention, or a customary act. *Urfi* marriage is a customary *Sunni* Muslim marriage contract that requires a *wali* (guardian) and witnesses but is not officially registered with state authorities. The high cost of marriage forces many young Muslim couples to resort to *urfi* as a way of getting around religious strictures against premarital sex.

Wali An Arabic word that denotes several meanings, including ‘custodian,’ ‘protector,’ ‘a man close to God,’ or ‘holy man.’ *Wali* is someone who has *welaya* (authority or guardianship) over somebody else and in *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) it means, in particular, an authorized agent of the bride in concluding a marriage contract where the *Wali* traditionally selects the bride groom. A *Wali,* also has the right of forbidding his women (wife, sister or daughter) from travelling, conducting official business, or undergoing certain medical procedures without permission. This, however, varies according to different laws within Muslim majority countries, where Saudi Arabia is most restrictive and Tunisia and Turkey are most progressive.

Walima An Arabic word for the marriage banquet. It is the second of the two traditional parts of a South Asian wedding. It is performed after the *Nikah* (Marriage Ceremony).

PREFACE

From East to West: A Narrative of my Own

On many occasions, I felt the desire to edit out this preface to avoid critical evaluations of its contents; as we are often expected 'to write ourselves out of the story we are telling' (Horsfall, 2001, p. 84). But the more I thought about it, the more it made sense to include it. I find value in revealing the position that I, as a researcher adopt in relation to this work. This disclosure reflects my motivations and highlights how my thinking and understanding of 'feminist' struggles outside of my positionality has shifted over the course of this project. In doing so, I am able to draw attention to feminist perspectives of reflexivity that display how one's own beliefs, backgrounds and feelings become part of the process of knowledge construction. Along these lines, the following narrative aims to trace a passage–from rebellion against misogyny, sexism and gender discrimination to political activism and eventually to academia. It also aims to bring to light the ways my work may be read and interpreted by a different audience from whom I have been familiar with, having recently moved from a Middle Eastern country to Britain.

Growing up in Egypt, I experienced conflict with my parents, extended family, friends and the wider society over what I believe is an 'obsession' with the woman's body. My parents were 'liberal' but the pressures inflicted upon them by the society's traditions and the troubles they faced from harassment to political prison were far fiercer than their grit to raise their children 'differently.' Despite their efforts that swung between refusing these pressures, at times, and giving in at other times, they failed to bring up 'docile,' 'obedient' children. We ended up exactly where they started; dissenting. When I graduated from university, I became extremely passionate about change. With the political turmoil of the 1980s and 1990s, a growing confrontation with Islamists over the application of *Shari'a* (Islamic law) pressured the regime to implement more conservative laws toward women (Al-Ali, 2002, p. 11). The problem which was, at the time of the Nationalist project of independence, concerned with the 'traditional' versus the 'western,' has become concerned

with the 'Islamic' versus the 'anti-Islamic.' Women, like myself, who identified themselves as 'secular,' became more and more vilified[1]. Women's contemporary activism in Egypt was and continues to battle over marriage, divorce and issues such as contraception and genital mutilation (Ahmed, 1992, p. 214). My battle, along with some other self-proclaimed 'secular' women was associated with personal autonomy and freedom of choice; matters that were not considered urgent within the Nationalist agenda (Tadros, 2008). In fact, they were considered 'radical' by many; the fundamentalists as well as some women activists who aligned with either Nationalists or Islamists rather than acting independently[2].

By the 2000s, I became extremely active within women's and human rights organizations which continued to regard my calls for 'freedom of choice' as 'unacceptable' both by our 'traditions' and 'religion.' In 2004, my path was diverted after being involved in an affair and getting pregnant without an official marriage. With an ex-partner denying our relationship and child and a public harshly attacking me, I was forced to resort to legal means to prove my child's paternity rights. Greatly supported by my family, I embraced the public struggle, fighting for my daughter's rights, questioning *Shari'a* laws, Middle Eastern women's rights and personal status laws[3]. My actions shocked the entire region, igniting a national debate, destabilizing numerous taboos and creating an international and regional media frenzy[4]. I fought and won every single court case I filed, marking a legal precedent that subsequently resulted in the reformation of paternity laws in Egypt[5]. Yet, as a result of daring to speak against *Shari'a,* I was labelled 'western,' 'infidel,' 'loose,' 'reckless' and sometimes 'anti-Muslim,' by colleagues, neighbours, the public as well as my own extended family.

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1. Secular women activists, like Nawal El Saadawi, for example, share a serious concern about growing Islamist militancy, however, their actual positions, as well as their specific understandings of secularism may vary (Al-Ali, 2002).
2. Since its early onset, feminism in Muslim societies was directly influenced by Western feminism and thus was seen by some as a vessel of continued colonial influence, thus the use of the term was, generally, not welcomed.
3. In Egypt, the law, based on Islamic *Shari'a*, stipulates that children must be named after their fathers and only through a proven marriage relationship.
4. See http://www.nytimes.com/2005/01/26/world/middleeast/paternity-suit-against-tv-star-scandalizes-egyptians.html; https://www.smh.com.au/news/World/Virgin-territory-for-Egypt-as-paternity-suit-filed/2005/01/28/1106850110497.html.
5. See http://sister-hood.com/ghadeer-ahmed/outlawed-pregnancy/.

The impact of these personal experiences was so profound. I discovered the relationship between the liberation of women and the liberation of the country from a corrupt regime and a rising Islamist ideology. As Nawal El Saadawi, a prominent Egyptian feminist and a staunch supporter of my activism, states ‘I understood the connection between sex, politics, economics, history, religion and morality’ (El Saadawi, 1997, p. 2). Fighting for change became a matter of life or death for me that I abandoned my former career as an interior architect and devoted my life to fighting gender discrimination in all its forms. I registered at the American University in Cairo to pursue a master’s degree in Gender and Women Studies. I volunteered for several NGOs, attended conferences around the Middle East, wrote blogs and opinion articles, participated in televised debates and became a serious and recognized active challenger of women’s status in Muslim countries.

My first PhD proposal sought to examine the growing phenomenon of the notable active participation of Western-born women in Islamist organizations, to understand how these women are convinced to engage in these forms of activism, ‘voluntarily’ choosing to leave behind a ‘liberal’ lifestyle. Coming from a ‘repressive’ country myself and believing—at the time—that western countries adopt democratic values that guarantee freedom of choice for all, I blindly believed that such a choice is perplexing. Once I started the initial contact with potential ‘participants,’ I was faced with ethical and methodological dilemmas. Firstly, I realized that to undertake a study on women who consider themselves ‘devout Muslims,’ I may have to hide the reality of my atheist and ‘secular’ convictions. In this case, the harm would have been minimal, but the guilt that I would have had for deceiving the ones with whom I am supposed to create a bond of empathy would have been grave. Secondly, I discovered that criticizing certain practices in my own culture situates me and other ‘Third World’ women who live in the west in a dilemma. As Shahnaz Khan (2001, p. 268) articulates:

> We are silenced … by a fear of being accused of betrayal by members of our communities. In addition, we are also aware that criticism of Third World cultures often serves to further demonize and stereotype Third World peoples, reinforcing a view that, as Gayatri Spivak reminds us, seeks to free brown women from brown men.

Having recently moved to Britain and aspiring to write about fundamental Islam critically, I became conscious that my work may be easily used to confirm the position of the Third World woman as a 'victim' in popular Western articulations. As a Third World feminist and a post-colonial subject, 'I am ambivalently positioned' (Khan, 2001, p. 270). Consequently, I decided to abandon the project. With 'secular' Muslim women activists battling religious fundamentalism, I share some commonalities, which create a level of empathy, that enables me, as a researcher, to engage with the ways they think by being able, in some ways, to 'think like them.' Equally, I acknowledge that as many commonalities, I also share differences with these women, one of which is the self-identification as 'secular,' which despite appearing as a commonality when I first decided to study them, I realized that the term in and of itself, signifies different understandings for us. Notwithstanding, I have not realized how crucial this issue is when I started my project, but it contributed to a deeper understanding of my positionality towards the end, in particular after the discussions with my external examiner in my VIVA examination. This 'partial' shared positionality between me, as a researcher and those I have researched brought with it another level of understanding, seeing, listening, telling and retelling.

That is not to say that my research process was entirely smooth. Many contradicting concerns continued to haunt me. On the one hand, my commitment to social change spawned my desire to interpret these women's experiences in a way that does not betray their understandings of their struggle. On the other hand, as these particular women come from privileged backgrounds and their activism is, at times, supported by their respective states, they—and myself—may be seen as 'native informants' who ally with the west whose desire to liberate the 'unprivileged' Third world woman from her 'barbaric' culture (Khan, 2001, p. 275). The earlier dilemma, thus, has not been avoided. Shahnaz Khan identifies two sets of 'native informants'; the Third World woman in the West who writes about less privileged Third World women and the Third World woman in the Third World 'whose social critique of her own context is frequently presented in the West without a corresponding analysis of how Western imperialism have created her context' (2001, p. 269). As a Third World woman who critiques her own community, studying 'Third World

women seeking to 'save' the less-privileged Third world woman, I can see—undeniably —that this may be the closest commonality between me and those I am studying.

Perhaps then, the answer lies in acknowledging these tensions as being productive (Grewal, 2012). As a researcher, I choose to place the narratives of the women whose stories are recounted in this thesis, their experiences and their ideas at the centre of analysis, knowing that this centrality can be unsettling as these voices have been largely criticized by postcolonial and anti-racist feminist scholarship for 'speaking the 'unpleasant truth'—male violence in immigrant societies, the misogyny of fundamentalist Muslim regimes, and the subjugation of women in the name of 'tradition'' (Grewal, 2012, p. 571). In this thesis, I demonstrate self-reflexivity throughout the research process as I travel through these 'contested' spaces. Additionally, I strengthen the research process by striving for transparency in my methodology and by acknowledging the limitations of my research. To understand the configuration of the stories narrated to me—what they emphasise, what they omit, what they may exaggerate—I am sensitive to my interests, as well as to the purposes the narrators bring to our exchange. I make clear here that my interest in secular Muslim women activists and their life stories reflects my broader motive to support feminist voices that may have been 'deliberately' unheard by some. By acknowledging that the stories and experiences of these women are embedded in a larger social and political context that challenges their very existence, I take a conscious decision to emphasise the complexities rather than what may seem contradictory. Perhaps others will do that in the future, while at this particular moment, within which voices that call for this particular standpoint struggle to exist, I presume this as most appropriate.

Throughout the three years of this PhD project, reading and rereading, writing and rewriting, I changed from a person that aimed to research others' processes of transformations to a person who recognizes her own processes of transformations as intricately intertwined with these others. In the course of writing this thesis, I came to see this work as part of a larger process, a voice in a dialogue among people who are 'deliberately' unheard. Most significantly, I realized that the interplay between theory, practice and everyday life are what gives vivacity to the written material. This interplay is not always as

neat as it looks on paper. Writing a reflexive thesis is a challenging journey. It was my negotiation through the tensions that enabled it to happen; a thesis that anticipates keeping the discursive space open while still maintaining integrity as an academic piece of writing.

I. INTRODUCTION

In 2014, a 24-year-old French citizen stabbed three policemen in the French city of Tours, while chanting 'Allah Akbar' before he was shot and killed by the police. In 2015, Shamima Begum made headlines when she left the UK as a 15-year-old schoolgirl to join ISIS (The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria). These are only a handful of a spiral of recent random individual actions motivated by extremists that represent an undercurrent rise of religious fundamentalism—one that started in the 1980s and intensified after the 9/11 attacks. With the formal creation of ISIS in 2013, footage of Muslim 'terrorists' fleeing to Syria, murdering and engaging in suicide bombings, claiming that their actions are 'Islamic,' has become the focus of a media frenzy. At the fault lines of these battles are questions of whether or not Islam is reconcilable with pluralism and human rights, creating a moral panic about the impending danger of 'Islamic fundamentalism' that despises 'the west' and all that it stands for.

Fundamentalism, strictly differentiated from religious observance, which I and many others, see as a matter of individual choice, is used in this dissertation to refer to modern political movements that utilise religion to gain or consolidate power (Dhaliwal & Yuval-Davis, 2014); Islamic fundamentalism as well as the traditional xenophobic far-right in the west. Women of Muslim background, both secular and faith-centred, who are engaged in the battle against fundamentalist ideologies and practices often find themselves 'caught between the devil and the deep blue sea' (Sahgal & Yuval-Davis, 2000, p. 16), navigating racialized and gendered politics that 'script the way their bodies and identities are narrated, defined and regulated' (Zine, 2006, p. 1). Caught up in the massive undercurrents of fundamentalism on the one hand and Islamophobia on the other, they become hostage to contradictory meanings imposed upon them; 'Orientalist' representations of backwardness and oppression and excessive affirmations of 'agency' and empowerment by postcolonial feminists (Moghissi, 1999; Saghal & Yuval-Davis, 2000; Zine, 2006; Othman, 2006; Dhaliwal & Yuval-Davis, 2014). This binary has distorted perceptions

of women of Muslim background, making it near impossible for them to be anything else in the public imaginary (Olufami, 2020).

In Britain in November 2017, Sara Khan, a woman activist of Pakistani Muslim background, was appointed as head of the UK's newly formed Commission for Countering Extremism. Many received the news with great concern. In just a couple of days, over 100 mainstream Muslim organizations and community leaders signed an open letter condemning the government's choice. Sara is a polarizing figure within mainstream politics. She is the co-founder of *Inspire*, which describes itself as 'an independent non-governmental counter-extremism and women's rights organization,' and has been a strong advocate of the government's controversial 'Prevent' counter-extremism strategy, which she believes is criticized by those driven by 'Islamist-hard-left alliance'[6]. As a result of her work against Islamic fundamentalism Sara is accused of being sold out to governments, labelled racist and 'Islamophobic' by both Islamists and liberals (Khan & McMahon, 2016). She is also detested by far-right groups for not denouncing Islam altogether. In France, in March 2017, Nadia Remadna, a social worker and a woman activist of Algerian Muslim background received a visit from Nicolas Duont-Aignan, a presidential candidate to discuss the problem of 'radicalization' in the Parisienne suburbs. Nadia is the founder of *Brigade de Mères*, a grassroots organization launched in 2014 to save children from recruitment in extremist and jihadist groups. While she pinpoints the connection between the spread of hard-line religious beliefs, radicalization and Europe's contemporary spate of terror attacks, she receives death threats and is being accused of Islamophobia by some Islamists, anti-Semitics and French leftists. She also enraged many Muslims when she said on French national television that what France needs is 'not more mosques but [more and better] schools'[7].

Sara, Nadia and their acquaintances, Henna Rai, Serenade Chafik and Aziza Sayeh and others interviewed for this study, are self-identified secular Muslim women activists involved in challenging religious fundamentalism, questioning existing gender norms and relations and contesting inequalities within their societies, while also claiming to be

6. See https://www.middleeasteye.net/fr/news/sara-khan-counter-extremism-commissioner-2047397586
7. See https://womenintheworld.com/2016/09/21/meet-the-founder-of-the-french-jihad-busting-mothers-brigade/

challenging conceptions of the excess of cultural relativism, Islamic exceptionalism[8] and Islamophobia. Experiencing abuse, harassment and sometimes death threats from radical Islamists who accuse them of collaborating with western imperialism by importing foreign ideas and practices and at the same time confronting hostility from groups such as neo-conservatives and the left, these women activists describe being at the heart of and reacting to these opposing discourses. Like other women of Muslim background who are vocal critics of 'conservative Muslim-immigrant communities,' the women whose stories are recounted here publicly position themselves as embracing the secular values of equality and tolerance (Fernando, 2009, p. 380). They also see themselves as ideally suited to speak for other Muslim women who are silenced by patriarchal Islamic fundamentalism as they have experienced first-hand the 'supposed evils' visited upon women of Muslim background[9]. Yet, despite being widely recognized among 'elite' circles in the west, they have been ignored or criticized by postcolonial feminist scholarship.

While sociologists have long paid a great deal of attention to publicly pious Muslim women (Maumoon, 1999; Jouili, 2006; Hafez, 2011; Massoumi, 2015; Inge, 2017), scholars have only recently begun to critically analyse the emergence of publicly 'secular' Muslims and in particular 'secular' women of Muslim background (Sahgal, 2000; Fayard & Rocheron, 2009; Fernando, 2009; Grewal, 2012; Dhaliwal, 2014). Mayanthi L. Fernando (2009) investigates the political, discursive and ideological conditions facilitating the appearance of 'secular' Muslim women in the French public sphere. She argues that they are politically efficacious for Western governments, shifting focus from the structural causes of socio-economic problems in the suburbs to 'Islamic fundamentalism.' Focusing on one controversial figure, namely Ayaan Hirsi Ali[10], Kiran Grewal (2012, p. 570) argues that a critical engagement with different voices despite that we may not like what they say, opens

8. A concept understood by neo-conservatives or other Right-wing groups in the West and Muslim fundamentalists alike, as the idea that, unlike other monotheistic religions that can undergo change and reform, Islam, at the worldly as well as the spiritual levels cannot be flexible or made to change.
9. Further elaboration on these women's beliefs, identities and ideologies are discussed later in this thesis.
10. A Somali-born Dutch-American activist, feminist, author, scholar and former politician. She is a former Muslim who rejected the faith and became an atheist and has been a vocal critic of Islam. She condemns radical Islam – and accuses liberals and the left of helping it flourish. Her critics say her views are simplistic and straight out of the One Nation playbook. In 2005, But she was also named by Time Magazine as one of the 100 most influential people in the world.

up interesting sites for rejuvenation for postcolonial feminism that has often ignored women who do not fit the 'essentialised and overly celebratory' image of the authentic 'Third World woman's voice.' Sukhwant Dhaliwal (2014) uses political narratives to reveal the ways in which women who choose to engage in the battle against religious fundamentalism, those who do not fit the 'authentic' image of a 'Muslim' woman, confront 'contradictory pressures' (p. 8), both from the Left and from the Right.

This project is part of the latter burgeoning efforts. In light of the geopolitical factors at play since the early 2000s; 9/11 and the subsequent 'War on Terror,' the emergence of ISIS, the crisis of national identity and the rise of right-wing politics, the women whose stories are recounted in this thesis may come across—to some—as being indispensable to their respective states using them as mouthpieces to advance their own 'anti-ISIS' agenda. Nonetheless, I follow Kiran Grewal (2012) in emphasizing the need for engaging with 'a diversity of women's voices in a constructive way rather than avoiding, ignoring or simply dismissing those messages that are politically unpalatable' (p. 571). As these particular women have been dismissed by postcolonial feminist scholarship, my quest is to make their accounts visible, hearable, understandable and noticeable. I do so by foregrounding their narratives to better understand not only the challenges and complexities of their engagement in activism and the ways in which discourses of race, gender, religion and ideology have shaped the terms of this engagement, but also their efforts to make these narratives intelligible to themselves and to others, making meaning in the face of prevailing accounts that portray 'Muslim' women as either fully 'empowered' or outright 'victims,' or dismiss them altogether for failing to portray the 'authentic' image of a Muslim woman.

The Women Activists

Sara Khan

Sara Khan is a British Human Rights Activist and founder of *Inspire* in 2009. After a journey of identity crisis and observing different forms of gender discrimination within Muslim

communities in Bradford, she chose to devote her life to fighting for gender equality and against religious fundamentalism. *Inspire* closed its doors in 2018 following Sara's appointment as Chief of the Commission for Countering Extremism in November 2017. I first met Sara in 2017, during which we conducted a brief preliminary interview. Following our first meeting and her consent to take part in this project, I conducted several interviews with her. We stayed in contact until late 2017. We met again in 2019 at the National Secular Society Conference in London. She gave me her personal email and we agreed to stay in touch. Sara's life story is recounted in chapter V of this thesis.

Henna Rai

A colleague of Sara, Henna was introduced to the world of politics by her father's involvement with the conservative party. In a series of personal and social experiences that facilitated her activism at different stages of her life in unique ways, she became an activist and outreach specialist working against radical Islamism and violent extremism, sexual trafficking and child grooming. In 2016, she founded her own organization 'Women against Radicalization Network' (WARN) which is supported by UK police. I conducted several interviews with Henna. We continued to connect over Facebook and Twitter. Henna's life story is recounted in chapter V of this thesis.

Kalsoom Bashir

Kalsoom has worked extensively for the past 25 years with Muslim communities. Having graduated from a London University with a Bachelor in Education, she went on to teach for 18 years in both primary and secondary schools besides voluntary teaching in an Islamic school in Bristol. She was also the lead Prevent Officer for Bristol City Council[11]. Kalsoom has taken the position of the director of *Inspire* from 2015 for about a year and a half. I

11. See http://archive.battleofideas.org.uk/2015/speaker_detail/10507

conducted a 45-minute semi-structured interview with her discussing her role in *Inspire* and her relationship with Sara.

Tehmina Kazi

Tehmina is an activist and an ex-Muslim, writer and author based in Ireland. From 2009 until 2016, she was the Director of *British Muslims for Secular Democracy* (BMSD), an organization that aims to raise awareness within British Muslims and the wider public of 'secular democracy' helping to contribute to a shared vision of citizenship. Tehmina has done considerable research on domestic and international human rights issues, particularly the detention of foreign nationals and violence against women in South Asia. Her articles have been published in many newspapers and blogs. Earlier in her life, Tehmina contributed with Sara on several projects. Similar to Kalsoom, I conducted a 45-minute semi-structured interview with her.

Nadia Remadna

Nadia Remadna is a French community activist and the founder of *Brigade des Mères* in 2014. Nadia's lived experiences of patriarchy and gender discrimination and her everyday experiences with women and youth in the *banlieues* contributed to her strong sense of responsibility to help those who have similar experiences. Witnessing the rising 'extremism' forced her to create *Brigade des Mères*. I first met with Nadia in April 2017. Following this initial meeting, I conducted several interviews with her on three separate trips to Paris. I continued to connect with Nadia, update her of the development of my thesis and, at times, follow up with questions over the phone. Nadia's life story is recounted in chapter V of this thesis.

Serenade Chafik

Serenade Chafik is a French-Egyptian writer and activist who fights for women's rights and defends the principles of secularism. Her fight to bring her daughter to France to save her

from female genital mutilation (FGM) in Egypt has given her particular publicity that went beyond Egypt and the region. She recounted her story in a book called *Répudiation, Femme et Mère en Égypte* (Repudiation: A Woman and Mother from Egypt). Serenade has collaborated with Nadia on several projects. I conducted several interviews with her during two of my trips to Paris. I am still closely in touch with Serenade, who willingly answers my follow up questions every time I give her a call. Serenade's life story is recounted in chapter V of this thesis.

Aziza Sayeh

Publicly known as the 'French mother who lost her son to *jihad*' and the 'first French woman to receive an official death certificate from ISIS,' Aziza Sayeh's life story is the last recounted in this thesis. Aziza activism began with Nadia. She, later, founded her own organization *Syria against Martyr Integrist* (SAMI), in collaboration with another mother of the brigade called Dominique Bons. I conducted several interviews with Aziza. In addition to the interviews, I attended a get together meeting at her house, in which she invited more than 40 mothers affected by the loss of a child or more to ISIS.

Rationale and Aims

The rationale behind this thesis is threefold. Firstly; it stems from a motivation to understand the specific pathways that have led these women to choose these complex arenas of women's political activism and how these choices relate to other aspects of their lives; social location, identity construction and political and ideological values. Secondly; it observes and acknowledges how, within Britain and France and across a closely related global context, women of Muslim background who do not fit neatly within the image of the 'authentic' Muslim woman, are finding it hard to be anything else in the public imaginary. On one hand, they are faced with growing exclusionary politics, connected to a rise of right-wing and identity politics that are often anti-Muslim. On the other hand, they are confronted with global Islamic fundamentalist movements and conservative forces that

accuse them of importing and disseminating ideas that are anti-Muslim. And all of this is taking place within a local and global crisis of neoliberal political economy and a 'war on terror.' Thirdly, it arises from a sense of an urgent need to document and understand the nature of activism, political engagement and challenges these women experience within their organizations, before it is too late to do so. This is prompted by the witnessing of the end of the formal days of activism of *Inspire* run by Sara Khan and its closure in Britain.

By focusing on those seemingly 'controversial' women activists in Britain and France and building on postcolonial and anti-racist feminist works on the activism of women of Muslim background and the recent literature on narratives and social movements, I aim to remedy the paucity of work done so far and challenge not only the dominant 'orientalist' narratives that portray 'Muslim' women as 'subjugated,' 'passive,' 'uninterested,' and 'uninformed,' but also the manufactured image of a 'strong,' 'liberated' and fully empowered Muslim woman in active negotiation with the Muslim male (Mahmoud, 2005; Hafez, 2011; Edwin, 2016). Today, the nature of 'Muslim' women's activism, at large, is attracting the attention of researchers and scholars for having come to represent an 'inner sanctum' of Islamic identity and a visible cultural marker against Western imperialism (Kandiyoti, 1996). For women activists of Muslim background endorsing a 'secular' agenda,' even more is at stake as their rejection of Islam as the only possible framework for political struggle, while continuing to adopt it as a private faith, or a 'cultural' facet induces distrust and uncertainty about their place within the setting of traditions and authenticity on one hand and western ideals of 'secularism' and modernity on the other.

Research Questions

I started this research with an interest in Muslim women endorsing a 'secular' agenda in their political engagement and activism. In particular, I sought to make more visible this particular ideology that is opposed to or critical of Islamist movements and beliefs. Reading the literature and determining what was already known and what was lacking led me to develop areas of interest and specific research questions I felt this study could tentatively

answer. By placing the activism of Muslim women activists in Britain and France battling religious fundamentalism in their local social, historical and political contexts, I reflect on how these particular women navigate through and sometimes resist the social structures in which they are embedded, using their life stories, political reflections and narratives of activism. I take these women's stories as a starting point for understanding the complexity of their investment in this arena of activism and the various accounts of its past, present and future. The thesis is divided into four parts, each is an endeavour to answer one of the following questions:

1. What do secular Muslim women activists do? Do they all struggle towards the same goals? How do they translate their goals and priorities into action? And what actions do they engage in?
2. How did they arrive at this particular arena of activism? What are the individual trajectories and what is the historical context? And how do they relate to one another?
3. How do these women self-identify? What narratives do they draw on when they talk about themselves? feminism, secularism, the 'War on Terror,' etc.?

And what do they say when they talk about their activism? And how do they navigate meaning-making when discursive spaces are severely limited?

Contesting Secularism(s) and Other Terms

Many studies take it for granted that secularism, simply defined as the separation of religion from state and politics, is a key component for the success and well-being of modern nation-states (Taylor, 2007). In recent years, scholars have begun to question the historical account of the inevitable triumph of the secular. Talal Asad (2003) points out that the simple story of the decline of religion can no longer be plausible. In this section, instead of assuming that secularism has a fixed and unchanging definition, I follow Talal Asad (2003) and Joan Wallach Scott (2017) in demonstrating that it has been articulated and implemented

differently in different contexts at different times. Talal Asad (2003) argues that secularism is neither singular in origin nor stable in its historical identity, as envisioned by theorists like Charles Taylor (2007). For him, there is a clear distinction between the epistemological category of the secular and the political doctrine of secularism. In this section, I briefly look at the ways the meaning of secularism has changed over the last two centuries from being the historical triumph of enlightenment over religion to becoming the positive alternative, not to all religions but to Islam in particular, which has resulted in ignoring the voices of self-proclaimed 'secular' Muslims; ones who identify as both secular and Muslim, adopt different understandings of the term 'secular' than that of the likes of Charles Taylor and embrace diverse and unique ways in which being 'Muslim' means to them. One must admit, however, that these various self-identifications are not solely based on agency, but are dependent on context.

Joan Wallach Scott (2017) identifies three key waves in the development of the term and its uses. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, secularism was deemed the progressive alternative to religion—the sign of the advance of civilization (Scott, 2017, p. 9). It was initially used as a polemic during nineteenth century anticlerical campaigns in England and France when it stood for free speech and the moral autonomy of individuals against the pressures of organized religion (Scott, 2017, p. 10). In the early twentieth century, explicit references to secularism faded from view in the West, losing their political relevance in the context of the Cold War (Scott, 2017, p. 28). It emerged again as a keyword toward the end of the twentieth century with the return of religion as a social and political force and particularly with Islam becoming a threat to the West (Scott, 2017, p. 14).

> In this new discourse, the secular and the Christian were increasingly considered synonymous and women's sexual emancipation became the primary indicator of gender equality … In its current version, secularism has become synonymous with (an ill-defined) gender equality that distinguishes West from East, the Christian secular from the Islamic (Ibid).

Today and especially since the attacks of September 11, secularism has been placed at the centre of arguments about immigrants being advanced by politicians on the right and the left in the countries of Western Europe (Scott, 2017, p. 10). In these debates, secularism is identified with western practices and beliefs that are said to contrast dramatically with Islam. As a result, the constitution of modern Europe as a secular civilization makes it incumbent to treat Muslims as abstract citizens on the one hand and as a distinctive minority, on the other. They are either to be tolerated (the liberal orientation) or restricted (the national orientation), depending on the politics. In France, the burgeoning Islamic revival is largely regarded by the 'secular' majority as a threat to the cultural integrity of France and to the secular values of 'freedom,' gender equality and tolerance that ostensibly define France (Fernando, 2009). This is marked by the passage of the headscarf ban in 2004 and the court's note that it was influenced by 'questions linked to Islam and to the place and status of Muslim women in society' (Scott, 2017, p. 16). In Britain, despite the greater porosity of public affirmations of religion, multicultural policies had already come under question when the *Rushdie affair* controversy amplified the tension that exists between 'the "freedom to" assert religious beliefs and make demands for religious recognition and the need to safeguard people's "freedom from" religion – the right to critique and live free from the influence of religion' (Dhaliwal, 2014, p. 10). This manifests with many spokespersons of the liberal establishment starting to use the term 'secularism' to characterize the backwardness of migrant communities (Bhabha, 1995).

Additionally, secularism has been a controversial concept in Islamic political thought, owing in part to the latter historical factors and in part to the obscurity of the concept itself. Within Muslim communities, the notion has acquired strong negative connotations due to the foregoing controversies which associated the term with the removal of Islamic influences from both the legal and the political spheres by the colonial powers. Linking the terms 'modernity' and 'secularism' with 'the west' recalls the colonial history of the Muslim world by the predominantly 'Christian' western world. Not surprisingly, such a negative history easily creates a wall of rejection of any western cultural product for many Muslims (Alrebh, 2019). Furthermore, a majority of Muslims argue that, unlike

Christianity, Islam does not separate religion from the state and many Muslims around the world welcome a significant role for Islam in their countries' political life. As such, women activists mobilising against religious fundamentalism and adopting 'secular' ideologies in Majority Muslim societies face a set of challenges. With the resurgence of political Islam, many women activists have been increasingly accused of collaborating with 'Western imperialism' by importing alien ideas and practices and circulating them throughout society (Al-Ali, 2000). In light of these charges, a new approach to the woman question materialized, which is widely known as 'Islamic Feminism,' defined by Margot Badran (2009) as a feminist discourse and practise articulated within an Islamic paradigm. This has created 'a lack of balance in most of the affirmative accounts of Muslim women's activism' (Moghissi, 2011, p. 77). As Islamic feminists are using Islam as the single essential element in women's lives and identities and the 'only' workable alternative to western feminism, the possibility to hear different voices in different cultural and political contexts becomes deterred. As a result, women's activism that is directed against the authority of *Shari'a* is not sufficiently heard, recorded or discussed (ibid). In some cases, secular women activists are subject to prison sentences (Mouri & Batmanghelichi, 2015).

Acknowledging that Muslim women activists in the west who adopt a secular ideology would not possibly face prison sentences as opposed to their counterparts living under theocratic authoritarian regimes, they continue to face multiple and contradictory challenges. Within their Muslim societies, restrictions are grounded first; in patriarchal traditions that subordinate them as women, and second; in the newly found religious 'Muslim' identity that demonizes them for adopting 'secularism.' They are dismissed and accused of holding anti-Islamic views and acting as imperialist apologists (Mouri & Batmanghelichi, 2015). They are also labelled inauthentic, theoretically uninformed and members of privileged classes (ibid). While the wider western societies in Britain and France continue to identify them as the 'Muslim' other, turning them to targets of intensified prejudice. They are situated as 'enemy outsiders' ((Thobani, 2003, p. 401 in (Zine, 2006)) as the public repeatedly reconstruct their status as 'non-White,' immigrant woman,

rendering them 'incapable of transcending their Muslim difference' (Fernando, 2009, p. 381).

The latter differences and contestations raise further issues. While Muslims in Britain are described as 'ethnic minorities' which refers to long-established immigrants and their descendants, Muslims in France are referred to as '*musliman*;' a label that identifies a social category that remains ambivalent and ambiguous (Joly & Wadia, 2017). The term 'Muslim' is also currently used in both countries to describe people born into families with Muslim backgrounds regardless of whether or not they practice their faith reflecting what Jim House calls 'the construction of hereditary Muslims' (1996, p. 224). As such identifying both as Muslim and as 'secular' in either country does not only become problematic but also signifies different subtexts. Identifying as Muslim in Britain is welcomed, while identifying as 'secular' Muslim under the prevalent multicultural policies is somehow contested. While in France, it is more problematic to identify as Muslim than as 'secular' which is widely accepted and welcomed. Despite criticisms, these women continue to self-identify as secular and Muslim. As a matter of fact, one of my aims in this study is to problematize notions like 'secular,' and 'Muslim.' Accordingly, I only provide a very preliminary working definition here. In the introduction of *Secularism, Gender and the State,* Nadja Al-Ali (2000) uses the term 'secular' to refer to the acceptance of the separation between religion and politics but does not necessarily denote anti-religious or anti-Islamic positions. She also argues that secular Muslim women activists do not endorse *Shari'a* as the main or only source of legislation. They also refer to human rights conventions as frames of reference to their struggle to achieve women's rights. This characterisation in some way resonates with the understandings of the women whose stories are recounted in this thesis. These women also draw to a considerable extent from discussions and models of secularism around the world; expressing solidarity with their counterparts in authoritarian regimes encountering the same battles.

The term 'women of Muslim background' is used interchangeably with 'Muslim women' to refer to women whose family origins are situated in countries where Islam is the majority religion. The use of the term reflects this study's recognition of the diversity of

practice, customs and interpretation of faith across Muslim societies and communities and my concern with both devout or practising women, and those who may not practice or adhere to the principle of Islam. My decision to include the term 'cultural Muslims' (Akbarzadeh & Roose, 2011) is based on several reasons. In conversations with the women I interviewed, I find that all of them retained a strong attachment to their Muslim families, communities and elements of Islamic cultural practice. However, it is worth mentioning that in Britain women activists identified strongly as Muslim and saw Islam as one of the drivers behind their politics whereas in France some described themselves as '*musulmane laïque*,' while others subscribed to the concept of '*culture musulmane.*'

In addition to the latter, in writing this thesis, other terms have presented challenges. I have made difficult choices about the words used in this thesis, not because I have identified the most accurate terms, but for the sake of fluidity. The use of 'activism,' for example calls for clarification. Activities like charity, research, advocacy, raising awareness, lobbying and development may not always be identified as forms of collective action if considered in isolation. The activism examined in this study rarely deploys conventional mobilizing strategies, structured organization, coherent ideology or clear-cut leadership. Yet these women are able to extend their choices, articulate demands and take advantage of the opportunity that their public presence offers them. Therefore, I use the term 'activism' to refer to the wide range of activities that these women present, including writing (books, news articles, blogs), awareness campaigns, educational workshops and public speaking.

And finally, acknowledging that while experiences might be different, Muslims have been engaging in a process of 'Islamization' through employing of so-called Islamic customs, principles and values to both personal and public lives. The range of terms that have been used to represent this rising phenomenon in both academic and non-academic literature reveals its complexity. The terms 'Islamic fundamentalism' and 'Islamic resurgence' that were used to describe revolutionary Islam in the seventies and eighties have now been replaced by other terms, including–but not limited–to 'Islamic movements,' 'political Islam,' 'neo-fundamentalism,' 'extremism,' 'jihadism' and more. In this thesis, I use the

term 'Islamism' to refer to a political ideology, not synonymous with the faith of Islam, but defines Islam as a socio-political system and advocates an expansionist Islamic state governed by *shari'a* law. I use the term 'Islamic extremism' in particular, as it was greatly used by women activists I interviewed. It is defined by the British government as any form of Islam that opposes 'democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs.' Acknowledging that many oppose the use of the term, fearing it could 'de-legitimize' the Islamic faith in general, criticizing it for associating non-violent Islamism (political Islam) with terrorism under the rubric of 'extremism,' I add to the government's definition of 'Islamic extremism' any form of Islamism that uses violence to oppose 'democracy, the rule of law … and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs.'

Naming, Claiming and Authorship

As I moved toward preparing the final copy of this thesis, difficult questions continued to resurface. First, I considered the consequences that the publishing of this thesis might create for the activists whose stories are recounted in it. It is true that I acquired signed consent forms with each woman I interviewed, yet, I repeatedly asked myself whether or not it is safe to display real names in the authorship of this work, as this display might make these women vulnerable with respect to possible responses from their families, the communities among whom they lived and worked and the wider societies with which they interacted. Nevertheless, the final decision was to use real names, as each of the women activists I interviewed, not only via the consent form she signed but throughout our interviews and various encounters, displayed a strong desire to come out as the author of her own story. In the end, aren't these stories of struggle the testimony of each woman's personal and powerful recollections of silencing, control and resistance she shared with me?

Another issue that needs to be addressed is the dilemma of whether I should expose certain personal, painful and sometimes embarrassing memories these women have shared with me. By sharing certain memories, these women made themselves vulnerable and took the risk of facing further backlash cast upon them once this study is made public.

Accordingly, I decided to omit some extremely personal stories to assure that 'no harm' is inflicted on the narrators of these stories by the publishing of this work. This is explained by what anthropologist Sherry Ortner (1995) called 'ethnographic refusal,' as a productive rather than obstructive part of the research process. As she defined, the term describes a process in which ethnographers refuse to write fully about a topic because they are worried about the political implications of their findings. The purpose of 'ethnographic refusal' is not to bury information, but to ensure that individuals, communities, or both, are able to respond to issues on their own terms. It is intended to redirect academic analysis away from harmful narratives that obscure slow violence and towards a concern with the right to self-representation.

A third dilemma was whether to use the forenames or surnames of the women activists whose stories are recounted in this thesis. Within cultural traditions and conventions, personal names are used to mark individual and social identities (Pilcher, 2017). In social research in general, as well as most forms of formal writing, the tendency is to use surnames when referring to public figures. For many women, their name—such an integral part of their identity—is a mutable object. In this thesis, I make a 'feminist' point by using forenames as opposed to given 'male' surnames. I do so to display a personal and individualistic dimension to these stories and to pay close attention to the working of gender. In other words, as Sara Ahmed (2017) articulated, to question 'who appears' is to pay attention to who is included and who is not.

The Organizing of the Thesis

One of the central arguments of this thesis is that the activism of secular Muslim women cannot be adequately understood through the lens of either 'victimhood' or 'agency,' and cannot be analyzed without situating it into the broader historical and political contexts in which it takes place. Chapter II maps out the complex interactions of race, gender and religion to reveal the ways in which the continuing legacies of the colonial encounters implicate the positioning of Muslims in general and Muslim women in particular within

the historical and contemporary representations related to war, violence and empire-building, and feminist responses to these representations. It, then, reviews the emerging body of work that draws on narrative to highlight the complexity of Muslim women's activism challenging earlier conceptualizations that rely on problematic binaries of either agency and empowerment or victimhood and subordination. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of transnational women's networks struggling to develop a framework of solidarity among diversely situated Muslim women.

This study draws on narrative theory to understand the challenges and complexities of the activism of secular Muslim women from their own perspectives. An outline of its usefulness is elaborated in Chapter III which provides a reflexive account of the epistemological and methodological approaches employed, beginning with a description of the feminist commitment that has guided this study. The chapter builds on the literature review in efforts to construct a transnational feminist method, informed by intersectional analysis that explore how gender, ethnicity, race, class, age, religion and ideology interact in different ways, depending on different contexts. I use narrative as a means of disrupting the pre-existing overarching explanations of 'Muslim' women in general and the women studied in this project in particular.

Chapter IV examines the work undertaken by the two .organizations mentioned earlier; *Inspire* in Britain and *Brigade de Mères* in France. It begins with a discussion of the contexts through which these organizations thrived. It provides insights into the emergence of ISIS and the rationale for State interventions against it. The chapter, then, describes the goals and priorities of each .organization and considers the forms of action into which these perceived goals and priorities are translated. A general presentation of the various activities of both organizations is followed by a more detailed presentation of its most notable projects. This outline allows for a clearer exploration of the narrative these women drew on, and an understanding of the ways these narratives 'speak back' to the previously reviewed literature.

Chapter V draws on narrative analysis to explore these women's life stories and understand the journeys by which they arrived at this particular arena of activism. In the process of looking across these life stories, these women formed a sort of collective with points of similarity and diversity. To attend to my concern with narrative and the details of lived experiences, I examine them through individual stories, with one conclusion that discusses key themes from across the interviews. By recounting these stories, I am not assuming that they are typical of all Muslim women activists instead, my aim is to shed light on the significance of these personal stories in revealing a complexity that may have not been easily revealed having chosen another method.

Chapter VI reflects on how these women positioned themselves, their politics and their work within the wider sociopolitical and historical debates they are embedded in. The narratives they drew on centered around feminism, secularism, religion and the 'War on Terror.' Notably, these narratives do not fit neatly into dominant political and academic accounts of Muslim women. Each woman articulated precise understandings of the meanings and significance of these terms to her and employed–or rejected–them in ways she perceived as unique to her own particular location and understanding. The chapter shows how these women are negotiating complex accounts and histories in efforts to counter prevailing narratives which are simplistic and polarized making it difficult for these women to align with any fixed category.

Chapter VII explores the narratives these women drew on when talking about their activism and the circumstances under which these narratives were constructed. It also examines the ways by which these women navigate within and through various pressures, as they themselves describe. Employing a narrative approach, thus, reveals that women's choices are not solely limited by material social structures, but also by their own senses of being women, Muslim, secular, etc., offering tools for thinking about how their particular choices may be a response to and an engagement with both material and ideological inequalities. The central argument, then, is that agency and victimisation are not absolute; they are always specific to the context. As such, I follow a number of scholars who argue for the need to engage with a diversity of women's voices in a constructive way rather than

avoiding, ignoring or simply dismissing them only because we may not like, or trust what they are trying to say.

II. UNDERSTANDING HISTORICAL REPRESENTATIONS: A LITERATURE REVIEW

This thesis is located within feminist frameworks that explore the interpretation of nationalism, race, citizenship, immigration and ethnic relations to explore migrant/ethnic minority women's activism in Britain and France. In this chapter, I highlight the failure of Orientalism to fully recognize the role of gender in its analysis—though Edward Said (1979, p. 147) does note the very masculine quality of colonial or Orientalist culture. In response to this failure, feminist work has explored how women of immigrant background navigate between racialized and gendered politics that shape the ways their bodies and identities are narrated, defined and regulated. In what follows, I draw on postcolonial anti-racist feminist analysis to map out the complex interactions of race, gender and religion in earlier imperial practices of conquest and colonization. I follow with an examination of how the continuing legacies of these encounters implicate the positioning of Muslims in general and Muslim women in particular within the historical and contemporary representations related to war, violence and empire building. Related to these developments is the growth of fundamentalist movements in Muslim societies and the rise of the right-wing in the West. As a result of these developments, Muslim women's rights and autonomy have suffered the consequences. In the second part of this chapter, I examine Muslim women's feminist political engagement with and resistance to the coexistent factors of both imperial and fundamentalist domination. I , then, present a brief review of the emerging body of work that draws on narrative to highlight the complexity of Muslim women's activism, shedding light on forms of activism that are too individualistic to be considered social movements and challenging earlier conceptualisations that rely on problematic binaries of either agency and empowerment or victimhood and subordination. And finally, I explore the wave of scholarly work that discusses the growth of transnational networks of women, that endeavours to combat racist, patriarchal and imperialist forms of domination in efforts to develop a framework of solidarity among diversely situated Muslim women. This new scholarship emphasises that Muslim women are immensely diverse, recognizes the

specificity of women's identities beyond being Muslim and avoids the inferences of homogenizing all Muslim women.

ORIENTALISM AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF 'THE OTHER'

The fascination with the Orient within Western imperial culture is a fascination which, in Edward Said's terms, creates an idea of Europe as 'a notion collectively identifying "us against the non-Europeans"' (Said, 1979, p. 7). In this sense, Orientalism 'creates an imaginary geographical divide based on the binarism of Occident/Orient' (Ahmed, 2000, p. 98). Edward Said stresses that relations between the 'West' and the 'non-West' have been continuously characterized by conflict, divisiveness and dichotomies; an inevitable consequence of and reaction to colonialism. Colonial expansion was a ferocious process marked by exploitation, genocide and suppression. Colonialism was, however, presented as 'a triumph of the civilized, moral, rational, superior human who altruistically carried the burden of bringing the fruits of reason, modernity, liberty, equality, emancipation, technology, progress and rule of law from Europe to other parts of the world' (Dhawan , et al., 2016, pp. p. 8-9). The work of eighteenth and nineteenth-century Orientalists have created the type of knowledge or information that placed Europe in a superior position (Takhar, 2013, p. 44). Slavery, for example, was justified on the basis of inferiority of Africans as a race (Brah, 1996). In the case of the Orient, two factors were used to inferiorise the people; race and religion (Said, 1979).

Undeniably, the period of direct colonial occupation and rule by imperial powers has passed, but we are still left with processes and practices of domination and economic exploitation, all signifying present-day imperialism which some call 'neo-colonialism' (Al-Ali, 2000, p. 20). Nadja Al-Ali (2000, p. 23) argues that Orientalism 'as the practice of homogenizing and essentializing differences, is well and alive, albeit better disguised than in the past and often undercover.' In British and French societies today, ethnic minorities are frequently cast in the role of the 'racialized other' (Takhar, 2013, p. 44). This is evident in the 'Rushdie Affair' following the publication of *The Satanic Verses* in 1989, the Gulf War

in 1991, the post 9/11 era; the 'War on Terrorism,' and the Iraq War in 2003 and more. Nacira Guénef-Souilamas (2006, p. 24) argues that 'France and the French are still colonial and already postcolonial; they shift from one position to the other.' This manifests in the idea of the 'French exception' deeply rooted in French colonialism, which relies on an ethnocentric conception of Frenchness viewed as a particularist universalist (ibid, p. 23). This does not only revive the rhetoric of 'us' versus 'them,' the 'civilized' versus the 'uncivilized,' and a new system of hierarchies, but also show the dangerous aspect of imperialism and resistance to it, in our so-called 'postcolonial' times (Al-Ali, 2000).

In this section, I look at Orientalism as 'one' means by which French and British cultures exercised colonial domination through creating the image of the 'oriental.' I also acknowledge and agree with Edward Said's critiques that his work resulted in a sense of essentializing differences between the 'East' and the 'West' and thereby refusing the hierarchical binary positions upon which imperialism depended (Lowe, 1994; Yegenoglu, 1998; Sardar, 1999). In his revised work, *Culture and Imperialism* and his response to Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations,* Edward Said (1994) himself argues that even within 'the Orientalist canon' there is no simple 'consolidated vision.' Thus, any careful analysis of colonial discourse must pay attention to alternative visions. An issue of equal, if not greater importance, is the omission of gender and class from some of the discussions of colonial discourse in his work (Lowe, 1994; Sharpe, 1993; Grewal, 1996; Suleri, 1992).

In her comparative study of French and British Orientalism, Lisa Lowe (1994, p. 5) questions whether Edward Said's model of Orientalism is monolithic in how it constructs the Orient as 'other' to the Occident. For her, Orientalism embodies discursive conflicts which produce an 'instability of the Orientalist terrain illustrated in the confluences and deviations of other discourses,' such as gender, race and class (Lowe, 1994, p. 20). Her study opens a space for a conception of Orientalism beyond the binary logic of otherness, to include a consideration of differences of race, gender and religion. Mohja Kahf (1999, p. 9) explains that the image of the oppressed Muslim/Arab woman became important during the building of the French and British empires in the nineteenth century which, 'in

subjugating whole Muslim societies, had a direct interest in viewing the Muslim woman as oppressed.'

The entanglement of race, gender and religion is recognized in contemporary Western societies through the different ways in which groups of people have been 'Orientalized.' For example, Avtar Brah (1996, p. 136) notes how 'social images of Pakistani women in present-day Britain may in part derive from colonial representations of Muslims in colonial India' (1996:136). Similar fascination is displayed by the French colonialists with reference to the use of the veil by Algerian women and their hidden and unobtainable sexuality (Pile, 1997). In both cases women are constructed as 'objects of desire, sensual, elusive harem girls,' and yet they were equally forsworn as backward victims of their misogynist cultures (Zine, 2006, p. 5). In the following section, I analyse the historical representations of women in colonial India and colonial Algeria to map out the interactions of race, gender and religion in earlier imperial practices of conquest and colonization and examine the ways in which concepts of 'othering' have placed women in both ex-colonies as helpless voiceless victims of their patriarchal cultures.

Nationalism, Decolonization and Gender

This section examines how the concept of 'othering' has been used to produce knowledge that situated women in French and British ex-colonies—in particular India and Algeria—as inferior and unable to act in the face of oppression. The section maps out the complex interactions of race, gender and religion in imperial practices of colonization. To challenge the perceived passivity of women, I briefly chart women's involvement in nationalist movements in both contexts. The concepts of collective histories, the commonality of experiences and the multiple locations of struggle 'provide the link between history and contemporary social relations of gendered postcoloniality' (Takhar, 2013). It is this link that a deeper understanding of Muslim women's activism within Britain and France could be achieved.

The British who had their control over India from the 1750s to the 1950s, saw themselves as a force for enlightenment, especially for women (Liddle, 1985). It is through the brutality of acts such as *sati,* polygamy, female infanticide, *purdah* and child-marriage that Orientalists produced their version of India, 'dichotomising the world into 'them' and 'us,' the strange and familiar, thereby emphasizing difference to the extreme' (Takhar, 2013, p. 46). Within this discourse, the mission of 'civilizing the Indian people,' was not only justifiable, but also welcomed (Chatterjee, 1989, p. 623). To challenge this domination, the colonized people had to find ways to engender reforms within their own cultures while 'retaining and strengthening the distinctive spiritual essence of the national culture' (ibid). The nationalist project, which started in the late 1800s, demanded the involvement of women in public activities, thereby creating a dilemma; 'how to present a modern image of India through demonstrating the ability of self-rule and how to control women's behaviour' (Takhar, 2013, p. 55). The answers to these questions were the fabric of the debates around social reform in the 19th century, questions which continue to have an influence to the present day.

Partha Chatterjee (1989, p. 627) asserts that nationalists in India resolved the latter debates by employing the concept of 'difference as a principle of selection' which she explains is to maintain 'the distinction between the social roles of men and women in terms of material and spiritual virtues.' By this principle, she argues, nationalism created the image of the 'new woman,' superior to the Western woman, the traditional Indian woman and the common woman (p. 627). To adjust to new conditions outside of the home, this new woman has to assert spiritual purity (feminine virtues). In other words, she must not become 'essentially Westernized' (ibid). Defined in this way, the new woman is subjected to a 'new patriarchy,' which invested women with the dubious honour of representing a distinctively modern national culture. For Partha Chatterjee, it is this particular nationalist construction of reform as a project of both emancipation and self-emancipation of women that explains

why the early generation of educated women themselves supported the nationalist idea of the ‘new woman’ (p. 628)[12].

In response to both the elitist nationalists and the colonial version put forward in the past, writers involved in ‘subaltern’ studies have been influential in putting forward an alternative history of India (Guha, 1997; Spivak, 1993). Their works demonstrate the involvement of the ‘subaltern masses’ and their efforts in resisting colonial rule. To be considered subaltern, one’s voice is supposedly suppressed and oppressed by colonial and elite discourses, despite the efforts of resistance. In her influential article ‘Can the Subaltern Speak? Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1993) provides a detailed account of the practice of *sati*, and engages in a debate that moves backwards and forwards in time, concluding that the Indian woman remains voiceless within both patriarchal and colonial oppressions. The task of retrieving the lost voice in history is assigned to the ‘new woman.’ For Spivak, ‘the subaltern’—the traditional woman and the common woman—cannot speak.’ It is true that in various writings on the nationalist movement it is argued that the participation and leadership of women’s activities has been fulfilled by ‘middle-class women’ (Thapar, 1993, p. 81). However, Partha Chatterjee argues that we would be mistaken to look for evidence of women’s autonomous struggle for equality and freedom only in the public archives of political affairs, ‘for unlike the women’s movement in 19th- and 20th-century Europe, the battle for the new idea of womanhood in the era of nationalism was waged in the home’ (p. 631). This is known from the evidence left behind in autobiographies, family histories, religious tracts, literature, theatre, songs, paintings, etc (ibid). Within the home, women spun and wove *khadi*, held classes to educate other women, contributed significantly to nationalist literature in the form of articles, poems and propaganda material and provided shelter and nursing care to nationalist leaders hiding from the British authorities (Thapar, 1993, p. 81).

The participation of women, however, meant that the ‘new woman’ would have to come out onto the streets with the ‘common woman’ (the real subaltern?). For the women,

12. See also (Thapar, 1993)

as identified by these dichotomous constructs, to demonstrate together in public spaces, the 'common woman' would have to become respectable (Takhar, 2013, p. 56). These oppositional constructs illuminate differences in class and caste. Religion also acted as a divide amongst middle-class women because more Hindu than Muslim women were involved in the nationalist movement, as Hindu culture was regarded as superior. This, later resulted in the calls for 'the establishment of a separate homeland for Muslims with Islam itself transformed into a form of Nationalism' (Mandaville, 2007, p. 51). Previously, women had been controlled within the private sphere, but the control of women activists was important for Mahatma Gandhi, who initially refused to support women's efforts at suffrage, putting forward instead that women should aid men in their quest to release India from British rule (Forbes, 1996).

In Algeria, after nearly 130-years of violence and oppression under French colonialism, Algerians began their struggle for independence in 1954. The Algerian war is described as 'a moment in which gendered, religious and ethnic identities were challenged' (Cooke, 1989, p. 2). To the French, Algerian women were seen as the 'oppressed of the oppressed' (ibid). Nevertheless, French policies towards women's rights never significantly improved under colonization (MacMaster, 2007). By 1954, when war broke out, women were completely excluded from public life. Only 4.5% were literate, few had jobs or went to school and they had no voting rights (Amrane-Minne & Djamila, 1999). The impact that the war had on shaping Algerian women's role in society is remarkably significant. Both the French and the *Front de Libération Nationale* (National Liberation Front, henceforth FLN) used women to symbolize a greater cause, appropriating their image to form a particular narrative of events that serve their own interests, with a few visible benefits for women themselves (Vince, 2010).

The French believed that appealing to women by improving their status could shatter the independence movement (MacMaster, 2007). They initiated policies that aimed to liberate Muslim women from the 'ignorance and the crushing weight of patriarchal domination' (ibid, p. 92). In reality, the so-called emancipation reforms put the majority of Algerian women at a disadvantage. Many Algerian men felt threatened by the 'moral

interference' of the French reforms (Cooke, 1989, p. 7). Accordingly, the FLN was forced into a position of discord with the advancement of women's rights, as for them, it meant an acceptance of the reforms of the colonial state (ibid). As the revolution gained momentum, so did the rise of conservatism among Algerians as a resistance to what they saw as the violation of their culture by the colonial power. The traditional image of women in Algerian society became the symbol of national identity and the public perception of Algerian women became central to the FLN's resistance narrative (Keddie, 2007, p. 142).

> The veil came to symbolize 'the dignity and validity of all native customs coming under attack (relating to women) and the need to affirm them as a means of resistance to Western domination' (Ahmed, 1992, p. 164).

While the FLN recruited a small number of women as fighters, similar to Indian nationalists' 'new woman,' they encouraged them to support their struggle through what they called 'patriotic motherhood': being good wives and mothers who would 'preserve traditional moral standards' as a way of moulding the next generation of Algerians (Helie-Lucas, 1990, p. 108). Nonetheless, they had no problem using them as propaganda for their cause. In response to the French emancipation reforms, the FLN launched its own campaign, claiming women could only achieve equality by fighting for a country freed from colonial domination (MacMaster, 2007, pp. 92-93). It publicized stories portraying the sacrifices of Algerian female fighters to instigate international distaste of the French regime, portraying women as innocent victims against the French aggressors (Vince, 2010, p. 442).

Using women in this way changed the image of the war from radical Arabs terrorising peaceful Europeans to that of the colonized fighting back against a brutal oppressor: 'The discourse on Algerian women was an important weapon in combating the French government's depiction of a nationalist struggle as a minority movement led by religious fanatics with a pan-Arab agenda' (Vince, 2010, p. 454). In reality, no woman was ever in a leadership position in the FLN and women were discriminated against because of their gender (ibid, p. 455). Women themselves remained silent in the name of national solidarity for fear of being seen as betraying the revolution (Helie-Lucas, 1990, p. 107). In

all intends and purpose, the appropriation of women's identity for ideological reasons by both Algerian and French forces profoundly influenced how their image and story was portrayed to the world, successfully preventing their voices from becoming part of an authentic discourse on the war after independence (Lazreg, 2018).

Despite the evident involvement of women in political activities in both the nationalist movement in India and the FLN in Algeria, it is the image of the subordinated woman, oppressed by patriarchy, that is reproduced in many Western feminist discourses, reinforcing the view of helplessness and submission. The Indian nationalist discourse is a discourse about women; a discourse which assigns to women a place, a sign, an objectified value. Similarly, the FLN used women during the conflict to symbolize a greater cause, appropriating their image to form a particular narrative of events. In essence, both colonial rulers and their nationalist opponents conspired to project a certain image of women's social and political roles that served their own interests. The question then is not whether patriarchal relations pre-date capitalism, but rather how these social relations have been reshaped within the context of capitalism and imperialism.

> 'Capitalism, patriarchy and imperialism are not independent albeit interlocking systems - they are part of the same structure. Capitalist social relations are themselves patriarchal and imperialist in form' (Brah, 1987, p. 39).

The Unresolved Legacies of Colonialism

The social reality of Muslim women's lives in Britain and France is constituted around a complex articulation of the economic, political and ideological structures that underpin the interrelationship between race, class and gender (Brah, 1996; Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1993; Rosello, 2005; Guénif-Souilamas, 2006; de Wenden, 2014). These structures are deeply rooted in colonialism and the 'civilizing' processes that have been associated with it for many centuries. When I speak of Muslim women, both in Britain and in France, I am referring to a very heterogeneous category of people. These women are differentiated

according to race, ethnicity, religion and class/social status. Despite these differences, the figure of the non-Western, subaltern woman—or the 'Third World Woman'—'continues to provide the foundation for intervention and claims of Western superiority often in ways that have changed little since the era of the colonial civilizing mission' (Grewal, 2016). In her seminal article 'Under Western Eyes,' Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1984) argues that for too long, women in the Third World have been considered victims—rather than agents—of their own destiny. In this section, I examine how the continuing legacies of colonial encounters implicate the positioning of Muslims in general and Muslim women in particular within the historical and contemporary representations constructed and reproduced against the background of colonialism and imperialism.

Stuart Hall (2012) argues that the transformations, displacements and condensations of a particular historic moment define new emergent 'diasporic' spaces. The post-war migration to Europe was part of the wider labour flow from the European periphery and the Third World to advanced Western Europe (Brah, 1996). Workers, mostly from former colonies, were recruited to Europe in response to the chronic labour shortages that accompanied the post-war economic expansion (ibid). These migrants were almost entirely male, as the majority of men who arrived earlier came primarily with the idea of accumulating sufficient savings and then returning home (Brah, 1996). Largely from working-class backgrounds, they settled in hostile environments, suffering from discrimination in many aspects of their lives, ranging from employment opportunities, discrimination in their everyday life, education, to the provision of social services (Raymond & Modood, 2007). In Britain, available jobs were the ones which white workers did not want. Thus, Asian came to be disproportionately represented in the lowest of British employment hierarchies (ibid). Unlike Britain, that promised equal citizenship to immigrants, In France, immigrants held the status of foreigners (*étranger),* so they did not enjoy political or social rights of any kind and were not even allowed to found associations until 1981 (Joly & Wadia, 2017). For a long time, immigrant workers remained invisible 'because they fitted in the niche reserved to them, defined by low skilled and low-income jobs and a working-class destiny' (Guénif-Souilamas, 2006, p. 23). Those groups, thus,

inherited the racist attributes and stereotypes mooted through the era of colonialism and its ideological arm.

The early generation of migrant women continued to work alongside men in difficult immigration and settlement conditions (Joly & Wadia, 2017, p. 6). By the 1960s, the anti-immigration campaigns, the 'bussing' of Asian children to schools outside the areas in which they lived, discrimination in housing and employment and experiences of being subjected to racial abuse constituted significant facets of the day-to-day experiences of Asians in Britain (Brah, 1996, p. 25). Various immigration acts in the sixties and seventies were followed by more anti-immigration campaigns depicting immigrants as running down inner-city areas, receiving priority housing, their children are holding British pupils back in school and so on (ibid, p. 27). In other words, the focus shifted away from the problems facing Asian immigrants to Asian immigrants themselves being portrayed as 'the problem.' In an earlier piece, Avtar Brah (1987, p. 44) provides some examples:

> When Margaret Thatcher constructs black cultures as an 'alien' threat to the 'British way of life' or Enoch Powell maintains that although black people are in Britain they cannot be of Britain, one is reminded of Kipling's view that.' East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet.'

In France, the process of social integration met different goals for the working class and immigrants, especially the ones coming from the former colonies, 'who were to remain in a subaltern position' (Guénif-Souilamas, 2006, p. 24). Nacira Guénif-Souilamas (2006) analyses what she calls the other 'French Exception' which, in her argument, works as a cultural and ethnic particularism that justifies the practical and symbolic exclusion of those who do not match it perfectly. In the name of civilization and claims of universalism, this conception assigns a particular illegitimate status limited to the specific origin, class or gender of immigrants, thereby denying them access to equal citizenship. This version of racism, she continues, is 'loaded with unexpressed resentment and wounded memories ... racism [that] mixes colonial nostalgia and postcolonial anxiety (ibid. p. 27).

Women in both countries faced double discrimination; gendered and ethnic. Heidi Safia Mirza (2009, pp. 6-7), argues that in the 'patriarchal post-imperial project of gendered and sexualized racialization,' the black/othered woman is constructed as a passive, docile victim of archaic traditional' customs and practices and of domineering Asian men. For Nacira Guénif-Souilamas (2006), sexism is constructed as the elusive and natural practice of the 'uncivilized' men 'guilty of causing public disorder and oppressing women' (p. 27). The lowly sexism in the suburbs stands against the gentrified centre of the city where sexism has, presumably, already been eradicated (ibid). Intrinsically, the image of the *banlieue* as a site of immigration has been exaggerated as a threat to Frenchness, especially since 1989, when the controversial veil entered into the public debate. The fear of the *banlieue* has become a fear of the *étranger* in general and more specifically a fear of the 'North African/Arab' (Grewal, 2007, p. 45), '*le garçon arabe*,' the rapist and 'veiler' of French girls (Guénif-Souilamas, 2006, p. 26).

In both Britain and France, this period witnessed a large scale of mobilisation among populations of immigrants. In Britain, as they were granted political and social rights—given they were not always able to access the social rights to which they were entitled—they were able to form associations, led mobilisations and actively participated in political parties, all of which operated a pivotal influence in the development of anti-discrimination policies (Joly, 2017, p. 163). In France, immigrants have been able to mobilise but only after they were allowed to found associations in 1981 (de Wenden, 2014). While in Britain, mass mobilisations were grounded on 'race' and 'class' bases, in France, they were grounded on 'race' and citizenship bases[13] (ibid). These mobilisations have led to some achievements in regards to citizenship rights, however, several important challenges 'have put the identity of second-generation immigrants on trial' (de Wenden, 2014, p. 152), one of which is the 9/11 attacks and the rise of 'Islamism' globally. As mentioned, the early period of immigration was dominated by racial markers, while Islam was not yet noticeable

13. France distinguishes Nationality and Citizenship. Nationality is a legal term while citizenship is a philosophical notion. In France, the access to nationality has been early considered as a tool of its assimilation policy since the beginnings of the Third Republic, in 1875. This is the result of the French long history of immigration and of its grappling with demographic and military needs beginning in the second part of the nineteenth century. See (de Wenden, 2014)

among stereotypes and prejudices (Joly, 2017). In the following section, I examine how neo-orientalist writing has gained increasing currency since the rise of 'Islamism' globally and how the latter racial and ethnic categorizations that occupied the public discourse in post-war Britain and France were gradually eclipsed by the emergence of fundamentalist movements from the early 1990s onwards.

NEO-ORIENTALISM, FUNDAMENTALISM AND POLITICS OF SAVING MUSLIM WOMEN

While in the early post-war decades, it was racial and ethnic categorizations that occupied public discourses, with the emergence of Islamist movements internationally, anti-Muslim hostility and prejudice—somehow replacing racial considerations—hit both countries (Joly, 2017). Populations that were previously identified as Pakistani, Indian, or Bangladeshi in Britain and North African/Arab in France, became 'Muslim' in public discourse and policies (ibid). Following the 9/11 events, in Britain, a policy of a 'War on Terror' that followed its American counterpart was adopted and in France, heated debates over the compatibility of Islam with the principles of the Republic became central to political debates, re-presenting Muslims in both countries as the 'other,' and multiplying the obstacles to their political and civic engagement. Here it is worth making a distinction between self-definition and categorization (Jenkins, 1997). The former extrapolates that populations of Muslim background set forth claims related to the practice of religion from within their communities, whereas the latter springs from an ascription from without at the hands of the majority population (ibid). Thus, racism was 'superseded by a novel negative categorization by majority society, pointing at Islam and Muslims' (Joly, 2017, p. 165).

Toward the end of the twentieth century, not only has religion achieved a new lease of life but particular forms of religious movements, grouped under the umbrella concept of 'fundamentalism,' seem to have become a 'vital force for (and against) social change all over the world and within different religions' (Saghal & Yuval-Davis, 2000, p. 8). Related to these developments is the growth of fundamentalist movements in Muslim-majority societies that engage in a reactive ideological and political tug of war with Western forces and the rise of

'emancipatory movements by fundamentalist absolutist and authoritarian political projects' in the West (Dhaliwal & Yuval-Davis, 2014, p. 8). In Britain, it was the Salman Rushdie affair and Muslims' mass demonstrations in protest 'not only against *The Satanic Verses* and its author but also against the ways in which the British state privileges Christianity' (Saghal & Yuval-Davis, 2000, p. 9)—that put the issue of fundamentalism at the centre of British politics. And increasingly since the events of 9/11 in 2001, Muslims have been positioned as anti-democratic, anti-liberal and 'living in societies located outside the western narrative of progress and modernity' (Zine, 2006, p. 2), in which discursive arena of the 'War on Terror' has 're-inscribed the ideological rhetoric of the crusades' (ibid).

In France, the 9/11 events formed 'less of a watershed' than in Britain, in terms of civic engagement (Joly, 2017, p. 168). The threat of terrorism, however, purveyed good opportunities for the state to tighten the security agenda, while it fed support to extreme-right and right-wing political leanings (ibid). Notwithstanding, France did not intervene in Iraq war and the French polity and society did not identify with the US 'War on Terror.' As such, the international dimension that nourished Islamophobia was less severe than it was in Britain (ibid). The question in France in regards to Islam was more of a national affair. Since 2002, right-wing politicians were set on a course to seduce voters away from the Front National, largely with an anti-Muslim agenda which failed to be challenged by left-wing politicians (ibid). This is set forth by Nacira Guénif-Souilamas (2006, p. 25) who explains that in France, 'archaism and resistance … is embedded in a reactionary conception of Frenchness mainly supported by a fundamentalist version of republicanism … symmetrical to the very fundamentalist Islam' which is seen as the new threat for Western democratic societies.

While the far-right is not the sole source of the anti-Muslim narrative, they are increasingly linked to the normalization of the discourse (Easat-Daas & Ounissi, 2013, p. 5). Far-right organizations externalise their xenophobic and discriminatory positions and frame Muslims as the 'source of problems' (ibid). They thus classify their anti-Muslim stance as a necessary response to this perceived threat and portray themselves as defenders of European society and culture (ibid), harnessing the ideological rhetoric of the crusades in

the colonial era. In the West, the most influential fundamentalist movement has been the neo-evangelical movement in the USA (Saghal & Yuval-Davis, 2000, p. 12). In the Third World and among Third World minorities in the West, the rise of fundamentalism is used as an 'indigenous' ideology to mobilize the 'masses' and confront racism, imperialism and superpowers interventions (Donald & Rattansi, 1992, p. 280). But it is also intimately linked with the failure of nationalist and socialist movements to bring about successful liberation from oppression, exploitation and poverty. In this sense, both views engage violent forms of religious rhetoric and fundamentalist notions of the enemy 'other' in their battles (Zine, 2006, p. 3). Along with the religious rhetoric, the War on Terror, like previous imperialist campaigns is defined by the politics of race and gender.

> Whether we examine the historical relations of colonialism or the neo-imperialist relations of current global politics, military violence is rooted in the complex inequalities of race, gender, class and ethnicity. The resurgence of racialized discourses is reminiscent of those predicated on early modernist tropes of social evolutionism and serve to cast Muslims in the global South as 'uncivilized and barbaric' (Zine, 2006, p. 3).

Ultimately, it comes without saying that Neo-orientalist writing, galvanised by a globalizing patriarchy, has intensified since the 9/11 attacks (ibid). Within these debates, women affect and are affected in several major ways. Some are central to the project of fundamentalism; the 'proper' behaviour of women, as the 'cultural' carriers, used to signify the difference between those who belong and those who do not. Others are integral to the idea of rescuing Muslim women from their '"terrorist", misogynist male countrymen' (Mouri & Batmanghelichi, 2015, p. 337). As such, for women, hostilities are compounded with aggravated perceptions of passivity and submissiveness and Islamophobia. This is explained by Jasmin Zine (2006, p. 1) as a form of 'gendered Islamophobia' which pertains to a specific form of discrimination levelled at Muslim women 'that proceed from historically ccontextualized negative stereotypes that inform and sustain the structural condition of domination (p. 10). Jasmin Zine explains Islamophobia as 'a fear of Islam or its adherents, that is translated into individual, ideological and systematic forms of

oppression' (Zine, 2006, p. 9). She describes her own experiences as a Muslim feminist as follows:

> As a Muslim feminist and anti-racist scholar-activist, I maneuver between these polarized spaces dodging racialized and Islamophobic discourses on one battle front and puritan, fundamentalist narratives on another, held hostage to the contradictory meanings being imposed upon my body and subjectivity from these sites.

These narratives rely on the re-production of Orientalist stereotypes and have been examined by feminists with various references, among which but not limited to; challenging 'official' narratives on women's rights in the War on Terror (Satterthwaite & Huckerby, 2013; Grewal, 2017; Farris, 2017); analysing and contesting representations of the veil and narratives of 'liberation' (Scott, 2007; Bullock, 2010; Lazreg, 2018); and questioning the perceived homogeneity of Muslim women (Bhimji, 2012; Contractor, 2012; Joly & Wadia, 2017). Indeed, the rhetoric surrounding Muslim women is a fundamental narrative of the War on Terror discourses as articulated by media, officials and liberal feminists in the West, who claim to be concerned for the abuses of rights of the 'voiceless' Muslim woman, whereas the reality is that these 'concerns' are being used as a pretext to justify interventions (Tickner, 2001, p. 57). The civilized versus uncivilized dichotomy at play in contemporary Western representations serves the purpose of 'Othering' the represented and constructing the creator of the representations in opposition to those who are 'Othered' (Khalid, 2011, p. 20). In the following section, I examine Muslim women's feminist political engagement with and resistance to the coexistent factors of both imperial and fundamentalist domination in Britain and France.

Mapping Feminist Responses in Britain and France

Mireille Rosello (2005) refers to 'performative encounters' as the dynamics that connect human beings with a long history of conflict. Despite the violence of certain shared historical experiences, these 'opponents' are able to invent a common, heretofore unspoken language, which produces a new subject position, which, although not necessarily devoid of

conflict, somehow manages to disrupt dominant discourses and scenarios by giving rise to new forms of expression and dialogue. As Michel Foucault (1982) notes, power and knowledge directly imply one another and that it is through sets of discursive practices that particular kinds of subjects are produced. It is through the earlier discourses of Orientalism that the veiled Muslim woman is constructed in Western literary imagination as an object of desire, sensual, elusive harem girl, yet disavowed in the same breath as a backward victim of her misogynistic culture (Zine, 2006, p. 4). And it is through 'performative encounters' that the Muslim woman attempts to unsettle past contexts and to transform how we think of cultural encounters.

Questions of the nature and articulation of resistance, agency and voice in colonial settings lie at the heart of postcolonial feminist studies and have caused considerable controversies amongst its most eminent scholars. These approaches unfold how imperialism mobilises gender 'as a way to justify the imposition of the 'modernising,' 'liberating' regime of empire (Dhawan , et al., 2016, p. 10). Between imperialists and nationalists, the third-world woman remains caught between competing patriarchal ideologies. Equally significant is their critique of mainstream western feminism[14] for its inability to incorporate issues of race and for its propensity to instrumentalize the 'muted' Third-world woman's voice to consolidate itself (Mohanty, 1984; Spivak, 1993). The beginning of the debates amongst postcolonial feminists was characterized by the formation of two opposing camps. The first aimed at recovering the native voice to challenge colonial historiography and present the Third-world woman as an agent of her liberation; and the second scrutinises such efforts by pointing to the heterogeneity of colonial subjects. While the former is criticized for the homogenization of the colonized, the latter is accused of neglecting anticolonial resistance as a collective (Dhawan , et al., 2016, p. 11). However, the debate progressed and moved away from these initial controversies to an endeavour to gain more nuanced understandings of the various ways in which women resist both patriarchal and imperialist representations.

14. For examples, see (Jeffrey, 1979; Minces, 1982; Cutrufelli, 1983)

At present, themes of public debates across the UK and France continue to characterize Muslim women as especially vulnerable to patriarchal practices and manipulation by 'terrorist' ideologies, despite that growing literature which advances a more nuanced picture shows evidence of political engagement and resistance. Lila Abu-Lughod's (Abu-Lughod, 2013) *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* considers a contemporary, neo-colonial practice of demeaning 'other'—in this case, Islamic—cultures to question whether or not Western ideas of the 'abused' Muslim women who need to be saved are correct. She argues that Muslim women, like women of other faiths and backgrounds, need to be viewed within their own historical, social and ideological contexts. Naaz Rashid (2016) examines how 'the Muslim woman' is socially constructed in the context of the United Kingdom's counterterrorism policy to shed light on the relationship between state representations of gender and Muslims' racialization in immigration societies. She looks at a series of initiatives undertaken by the UK government to engage Muslim women in the 'War on Terror' by raising the aspirations of Muslim girls, improving Muslim women's religious understanding and increasing women's civic engagement in Muslim communities. She shows that by discursively linking women's empowerment to antiterrorism and by downplaying the significance of other, nonreligious dimensions of identity, these initiatives perpetuate a 'civilizationist discourse' (p. 10) that, in reality 'dis-empowers' Muslim women, ultimately limiting their capacity to forge intergroup solidarities. In other words, this institutional framework leads Muslim women to engage in a kind of 'strategic pragmatism,' adapting their behaviours in ways that reinforce policy makers' reductive focus on Islam as a cornerstone of identity.

In the French context, Sara Farris (2017) writes that 'the current convergence between the anti-Islam feminist front and anti-immigration nationalist and neoliberal political agendas in the name of women's rights exposes a radical performative contradiction, whose effects are potentially disastrous for women's struggles in general (p. 117). Femonationalism, she argues, is a conceptualisation that brings together longstanding analyses of the role of women and the rights of women in nationalist projects–'the recurring ideological trope of women as "bearer" of the nation across time and as the contemporary

mobilisation of women's rights and gender equality within a nationalist political framework across the western European space' (Farris, 2017, p. 113). She writes of various pushes to integrate Muslim and migrant women through forms of economic activity that continue to place them as primarily care workers, replicating the activity and dynamic of the private sphere but as an indication of productive potential. Read in this way, the call for migrant women to become culturally integrated through economic activity mimics other politics where migrant women and their lower status work is the necessary supplement that assists European women in their project of remaking gendered roles at home and at work. By positioning Muslim and other racialized immigrant women as in need of rescue from their patriarchal cultures, femonationalism provides ideological justification for what is in fact a neoliberal crisis of social reproduction, which effectively funnels minority women into low-paying and precarious 'care' work (ibid).

Postcolonial feminist research has also explored Muslim women's struggles for their rights to wear religious attire (Afshar, 2008; Zempi, 2016); examined their involvement in political activism (Werbner, 2000; Massoumi, 2015; Lewicki & O'Toole, 2016) and provided evidence of 'agency' in relation to the War on Terror (Brown, 2006; Rashid, 2014; Massoumi, 2015). Using interview data and analysis of newspaper editorials alongside focus groups with grassroots Muslim women activists, Narzanin Massoumi (2015) demonstrates that participants in the anti-'War on Terror' movement in the UK offer an alternative story to the 'cynical' use of women's rights to justify war, utilising ways in which agency is deployed to challenge the trope of the 'oppressed Muslim woman.' Fazila Bhimji (2012) challenges the understandings of British Asian Muslim women as a fixed, static and homogenous group. By providing an account of the cosmopolitan lives of her participants, she argues that British South Asian Muslim women are not only a diverse group 'but rather that their religious identities and background enable them to form diverse relationships and to be open to diversity and difference and thus strive for universal and communitarian values and equalities' (p. 9). Caitlin Killian (2006) focuses on gender, culture and identity to examine the experiences and challenges of 45 first-generation women from the Maghreb (Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia) living in France. Her work gives a profound sense that the

experiences of 'identity negotiation' lie within making 'cultural choices'; the process of selective acculturation or 'picking and choosing among cultural beliefs' (Killian, 2006).

In challenging Western feminist assumptions, postcolonial gender scholarship highlighted and problematized the different social, economic and political dynamics that influenced and created the contexts in which Muslim women inhabited, revealing the complexity of the relationship between women as active subjects in their 'liberation' and as objects of other wider political projects, rejecting the argument that portrayed Muslim women as passive, subjugated, etc. The attention given to Muslim women's agency by postcolonial feminist scholars and the recognition and acknowledgement of their skills and resilience in negotiating change in their societies is a bracing turn in the scholarship of Islam and gender which progressed from an initial focus on oppression and cultural victimhood by western feminism in the 80s[15]. In response to those celebrating women's agency, regardless of whether Muslim women activists are 'agents of patriarchal domination and control,' Haideh Moghissi (2011, p. 80) suggests adding 'the element of conscious action against forces of domination.' That is to say, agency should be acting on behalf of women and for their own benefit. In her words, she emphasises:

> For women, having agency should include moving in the direction of identifying the forces that limit their capacity to have control over their lives and make informed choices within specific cultural and political contexts, to transform the conditions that reduce and weaken that capacity. Obviously, resistance against domination is central to this definition of agency regardless of the form and intensity of the resistance (ibid).

I second Moghissi in highlighting the need for a critical analysis of religious-based calls for reform. The latter explanations of Muslim women's activism reflect an understanding of these women as 'an undifferentiated crowd,' united by their faith, irrespective of whether they are 'practising Muslims' or not (Moghissi, 2011, p. 18), ignoring struggles of women who don't work from a faith-based standpoint. It may be noteworthy to draw attention to the fact that the struggles of Muslim women to gain emancipation and

15. For examples, see (Jeffrey, 1979; Minces, 1982; Cutrufelli, 1983).

equality is not limited to them as Muslims. To this end, scholars have only recently begun to critically analyse the emergence of publicly 'secular' Muslims and in particular 'secular' women of Muslim background; ones that are said to occupy 'privileged' status to those discussed earlier (Sahgal, 2000; Fayard & Rocheron, 2009; Fernando, 2009; Grewal, 2012; Dhaliwal, 2014). Mayanthi L. Fernando (2009) investigates the political, discursive and ideological conditions facilitating the appearance of 'secular' Muslim women in the French public sphere. She argues that they are politically efficacious for western governments, shifting focus from the structural causes of socio-economic problems in the suburbs to 'Islamic fundamentalism.' Similarly, examining the activism and performativity of 'secular' Muslim women's associations in France, Wendy Pojmann (2011) argues that decolonization, immigration and secularity must be taken into consideration to understand the different approaches Muslim women have used in the public sphere. For her, the recent popularity of the French women's organization *Ni Putes Ni Soumises*, for example, must be understood within the context of the broader phenomenon of public favour for ethnic minority women who 'promote' republican values of liberty, equality and fraternity.

Given the eminent attempts at recovering the native voice in response to both patriarchal and imperialist representations, it is not surprising that the latter works portray secular Muslim women as indispensable to their respective states used as a 'conduit' to advance their own 'anti-terror' agendas. As secular Muslim women are repeatedly denounced as' inauthentic,' it is arduous, at times, to draw a line that distinguishes their efforts from those of alleged 'native informants.' Shahnaz Khan (2001, p. 269) argues that the Western-based Muslim native informant is compelled to 'present true accounts of experience in relation to her own racial/cultural group from a position of fixed identity.' This 'a priori' positioning, Jasmin Zine (2006, pp. 11-12) argues, 'implicates the space of Muslim women's theorizing and praxis by containing it within static notions of Islam and Islamic identity.' The War on Terror increasingly forces Muslim women to demonstrate whether they qualify as 'good Muslims' or 'bad Muslims' (Mamdani, 2004), where the 'good Muslims' are the ones supporting their respective governments in their battle against fundamentalist Islam. Sadia Abbas (2013, p. 165) asks 'are secular or reformist Muslim

feminists allowed to talk about patriarchal structures that draw upon Islam, or are they always to be subjected to disciplining by the metropolitan gaze … In other words, are Muslims always to remain caught between the distortions, misrepresentations and bigotries of the media-empire-neocon and the high-minded apologias of this configuration's left-liberal critics?' These debates, however, are currently progressing in efforts to move away from these initial controversies to an endeavour to gain more nuanced understandings of the various ways in which Muslim women—both the ones perceived as 'privileged' and the ones working from the grassroots—resist both patriarchal and imperialist representations. In the following, I look at these new developments.

ACTIVISM AND NARRATIVE

The genre of autobiography has been and continue to be 'celebrated as a means by which non-white women have sought to challenge dominant constructions of subjectivity and assert different conceptions of self in a voice which is their own' (Grewal, 2012, p. 580). The last few decades have seen the emergence of a rich and innovative exploration of women's linguistic resistance, which is now often conceptualized in terms of 'counter-narratives' or 'counter-stories' which challenge and disrupt hegemonic framing of social realities. Suzanne McKenzie-Mohr, Michelle N. Lafrance's (2014) and Jo Woodiwiss, et al. (2017) edited volumes are concerned with women's attempts to re-story their lives when prevailing discourses and dominant narrative are unhelpful, or harmful. The stories recounted in both volumes are counter-stories that form an arena of possibilities and challenges both within each counter-story and across all of them collectively. Bringing together feminist scholarship and narrative approaches, these volumes provide examples of feminist narrative studies that make explicit the links between theory and practice. Using narratives of the different trajectories of women's life stories, they offer new ways of exploring and expanding our understanding of women's lives, while at the same time raising wider issues concerning the implications of telling particular stories.

In the introduction of *Autobiography & Postmodernism,* Leigh Gilmore (1994) argues that unlike conventional understandings of autobiography as the domain of universalised and transcendent self-presentation, feminist autobiographies emphasise the centrality of narratives that may often be considered 'marginal.' She argues that reading subjectivity dialogically, attentive to the instabilities of texts, allows new questions about the possibilities of human agency and emphasises the dynamic, multiply embedded and fundamentally discursive character of self-representational discourse. In an essay in the same volume, Betty Bergland (1994) asserts that in occupying multiple and contradictory discursive spaces, narratives of immigrants are a primary mode of postmodern autobiography because they show how differently the processes of Westernisation operate in the narratives of such writers. In *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation,* Leigh Gilmore (1994) emphasises the concept of 'autobiographics' as opposed to 'autobiographies' which has functioned as an exclusionary canon in critical history, above all for women's texts that have usually been 'othered.' Mapping the intersections of identity politics and body politics, the stratifications within and between identity and gender and the historical and semiotic contextualizations of identity discourses, she repeatedly undermines the notion of universality upon which definitions of autobiography have depended.

By writing themselves into their work, feminists offer new insights into the interplay of research and activism. Some Muslim women activists in the West have taken the initiative to document their own narratives of activism. Among which is Fadela Amara (2006), who recounts the development of her organization *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* (Neither Whores nor Submissives) and the degrading conditions of women in the suburbs. The book is written in a style that is both memoir and political manifesto (Grewal, 2017). The first part of the book chronicles her own life story of growing up in a typical North-African family of ten children in central France, with an authoritarian father who gave sons more personal freedoms than daughters. In the middle section of the book, she asserts that constraints on young women of immigrant origin are no longer imposed 'by tradition or by the family' but rather by young men who have become the 'new guardians of the housing projects' (pp. 63 - 65). She argues that poverty, racism and exclusion from French society have 'generated an

incredible rage' within young men and that they ease their feelings of powerlessness by exercising mastery over the only domain they can control; women (p. 68). Sukhwant Dhaliwal and Nira Yuval-Davis (2014) provide the context and the history of *Women Against Fundamentalism* (WAF), an organization established in the UK in opposition to global fundamentalist agenda. Provoked by the political storms set off by religious absolutism after the violent protests following the 1989 publication of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, the foundational members of WAF offer detailed narrative accounts of trajectories of their lives and the ways by which they came together around the common belief in the crucial role of secular spaces in safeguarding equality for people, whether religious or not.

While the latter collections constitute what some may call personal narratives; the telling of one's own life story, a growing number of feminist scholars also sought to make use of personal stories in researching other women's stories, looking at the accounts these stories present and exploring the background and the contexts they are embedded in. Examining narratives offers analytical insights and illuminates central features of meaning-making, experiences and ideologies of the tellers of these narratives (Davis, 2002). It also helps us look beyond hegemonic narratives to open up possibilities for women's stories and counter-stories to emerge. In exploring the narratives and memories of British-based women and their engagement with feminism, Carly Guest (2016) attends to the specific and particular practices of 'becoming feminist' through a series of individual stories by analysing the various and complex ways in which feminism and its histories were received and processed by her case studies. In focusing on the specificity of experiences, she disrupts overarching narratives of feminism and its histories, while acknowledging that such narratives are often used to sustain, defend and maintain a secure feminist identity.

Carly Guest's work emerged amidst a growing number of studies—that I follow in this thesis—that challenge how we think, write and speak about women's histories and the contexts in which they were formed (Munro, 1998; Polletta, 2006; McGuire, et al., 2010; McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2014; Woodiwiss, et al., 2017). Through recounting their own life experiences, they seek to situate and affirm their struggles. However, some scholars argue that problematic foundations are underlying this celebration. Kiran Grewal asks what is to

be done about those who make highly instrumental use of the identity of the 'vulnerable, disempowered woman'? (ibid, p. 581-582). The problem, she argues, is that 'narratives' assume an ability on the part of the narrator to 'throw off all discursive forms of domination and operate in a highly critically reflexive way' (ibid). She continues:

> Doubtless, testimonial literature has provided a source of liberation and agency for both colonized peoples broadly and women specifically. So, too, the existence of such a genre is in itself a powerful challenge to hegemonic discourses and structures of power. However, an uncritical celebration … raises the question, do 'the people' all want to be represented in this way? And what happens if this representation of 'the people' is co-opted by someone in a manner which is actually counter-productive? Or if their understanding of the 'problem' and the 'solution' paves the way for new forms of exclusion?

Kiran Grewal's critique is particularly relevant to this research and its participants. In her journal article 'Reclaiming the Voice of the 'Third World Woman,'' she points out the 'dubious' authority of 'lived experience' in the case of Ayaan Hirsi Ali. She argues that on the one hand her book, which is 'based on her own lived experience,' makes it hard to contradict her, while on the other hand, she raises concerns with the language of 'authenticity' and identity when it is used to make sweeping generalisations and claims of speaking on behalf of those who are voiceless. She emphasises that in the process of asserting the right of the 'subaltern to speak,' 'we end up within the difficult space of trying to work out *who* that subaltern is and *how* to both acknowledge and situate what they say' (Grewal, 2012, p. 583). In this research, which examines the narratives and 'lived experiences' of women who are also vocal critics of 'conservative Muslim-immigrant communities,' ones who publicly position themselves as embracing the secular values of liberty, equality and tolerance and see themselves as ideally suited to speak for other Muslim women who are silenced by patriarchal Islamic 'fundamentalists,' it may be reasonable to question their intentions. In attempting to solve such dilemma, Kiran Grewal employs the notion of 'postcolonial habitus' to reflect the depth of internalisation of colonial regimes of control; a 'classic re-enactment of the colonial 'civilizing mission' discourse' (p. 585). While this explanation may very well be appropriate in the case of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, as she seems to

'demonstrate a feeling that she cannot be a feminist *and* a Muslim, a liberated individual *and* an African' (p. 586), the women whose stories are recounted here and many others, espouse feminist, intellectual, Muslim and Ethnic identity. I agree with Kiran Grewal that these identities may not always coexist easily, as displayed by the stories recounted in this thesis and as I have demonstrated in the preface that 'feeling damned either way' (ibid, p. 586), places some—in fact most—Muslim women activists in positions that are discursively scripted either in the service of neo-imperialist goals or from within a fundamentalist worldview (Zine, 2006, p. 11). What I'm trying to argue here and will be more apparent in the findings of this study, is that even those portrayed as 'privileged' are ambivalently positioned. They are not as different as one might imagine. Although they are situated differently, they have intertwined histories (Khan, 2001).

Catherine Riessman (1993) argues that narratives go beyond exploring women's 'lived experiences' to examining how and why they come to understand and narrate their experiences the way they do. It is this endeavour that this work is striving to achieve. Following several studies that examine how activists understand, narrate and reflect on their life stories, experiences and paths to activism, rather than imposing a specific interpretation to their actions, I examine the voices of these contested—sometimes deliberately unheard women—as a starting point to understand how they develop their consciousness, creating what Nadje Al-Ali (2000, p. 90) calls the 'web of meanings,' an interrelation of individual knowledge, experiences of self and the general circumstances. The difficulty and challenge of this approach is to interrogate how and why particular stories are being told without discrediting those who are telling them. But, as experience is constantly changing, one cannot claim that there is one fixed story that describes it (Presser & Sandberg, 2015). Stories are tailored to the purpose of storytelling; therefore, I engage with what these stories are and their meaning to their narrators to understand how and why they are told and open up spaces to see the potential for new and different stories, despite that we may not always like what they are saying. Robert Atkinson (Atkinson, 1998, p. 7) suggests that 'where we tell our own stories in our own words, is a movement towards acknowledging personal truth from the subjective point of view as well as a movement

towards the validity of narrative … It highlights the most important influences, experiences, circumstances, issues, themes and lessons of a lifetime.' Therefore, I take the stories recounted in this thesis to reflect silenced truths as the narrators perceive them; 'storied experiences,' not experiences per se. As Joan Wallach Scott explains, 'productions of knowledge of the self, not reflections either of external or internal truth' (1992, p. 36 in (Grewal, 2017, p. 174)).

> Their experiences can be read neither as wholly autonomous acts of agency nor as wholly determined acts of historicity. In fact, it is the tension that exists between these two extremes in both cases that provides a fruitful site for exploration (ibid).

It is in this context that the stories recounted here may construct oppositional stories or counter-narratives at odds with or obstructed by dominant narratives. Using stories, thus, illustrates one of the key themes of this thesis; which is in looking at the particular, the patterns and connections could be drawn without necessarily homogenizing the diversity and differences. Through the attempts of these women to counter-story their lives, they are challenging narratives that portray 'all' Muslim women as either victims or fully empowered. These women's narratives represent a complexity that goes beyond simple explanations of agency versus victimhood. Finding ways to adjust our 'hearing' to more complex and nuanced alternatives is necessary for these counter-narratives to emerge (Mckenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2014). As feminist scholars/activists, we are compelled to support such discursive resistance and the circulation of alternative visions and voices, that open up new prospects not only reflecting the complex and intersectional contexts of women's lives, but also suggesting new possibilities. Sharing insights into the processes of constructing counter-narratives can productively contribute to ongoing discussions of the ways in which questions of representation, voice, authority and privilege might be negotiated to support these emergent narratives (Davis, 2002; Andrews, 2007; McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2014). But currently, there is no cohesive framework for feminism among the variously oriented Muslim women who operate from either secular or religious paradigms, or between the ones who operate from privileged positions and those who are from the grassroots. Some secular feminists have started to build transnational alliances yet remain ideologically at odds with

faith-based women who root their resistance within the space of religious reform (Zine, 2006). In the following section, I look at various endeavours to combat racist, patriarchal and imperialist forms of domination as a means of developing a framework of solidarity among diversely situated Muslim women.

SOLIDARITY IN TRANSNATIONAL SPACES

The problem with the debate over the role of Islamists and secularists and their impact on Muslim women's rights is that too often we find ourselves entangled between two extreme views. Faith-based and secular Muslim feminists often collide over politically charged issues such as veiling. Many—but not all—secular feminists view it as an undeniable example of religious fundamentalism (Zine, 2006). Yet, not all 'faith -based' Muslim women activists necessarily view it as a 'sacred' religious tradition (ibid). Scholars also note the multiple social and political meaning and purposes that the veil has embedded within different geopolitical and historical contexts (Scott, 2007). Joan Wallach Scott argues that the issue of the *hijab* ban in Europe must be articulated from within an anti-racist paradigm and linked to broader systems of Islamophobia and Xenophobia and the connection of Muslim women's bodies to the War on Terror. But because she represents the matter within the French context, she sees those who oppose the ban as asserting their agency by choosing to wear the scarf. In this sense, she somehow ignores the possibility that there might be coercion involved in girls younger than eighteen wearing the headscarf. She does acknowledge that there is, in fact, patriarchy in Muslim contexts as well, but she is quick to remind the reader that this is no worse than the French case. As such, we must remember that both ideological views—the imperialist and the fundamentalist—limit women's agency, autonomy and freedom.

> In the 'war on terror,' Muslim women operate as pawns manipulated to corroborate the moral righteousness of the political and economic goals of … imperial intervention in Muslim societies executed on their behalf as a campaign delivering their 'liberation.' On the other hand, they also operate as the guardians of faith and honour in Islamic fundamentalist

conceptions that must be safeguarded from the seduction and encroachment of Western moral corruptions (Zine, 2006).

Entrapped within these binaries, Muslim feminists battle both these fronts, as well as the seemingly conflicting ideological positions amongst themselves. The social and political views and orientations held by Muslim feminists vary from conservative to secular to what Jasmin Zine (2006) terms 'critically faith-based,' and more. Not only the ideological divides but also the imbalances of North vs South and West vs Rest create further divisions (Mouri & Batmanghelichi, 2015). Muslim women activists who are able to write, organize and resist from Western-based spaces benefit from a social, political and economic location that occupy privileged stances (Khan, 2001), making it look as if they are betraying those who struggle from grassroots positions. Acknowledging these differences, Muslim women activists and scholars were forced to take on a new turn. Since the 1980s, the experiences of women activists seeking gender equality and gender justice, represented by a new generation of Muslim immigrant scholars in the west have opened up to different groups of women (Badran, 2010). Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML), an organization led by the Algerian-French secular feminist Marieme Hélie-Lucas in the mid-1980s, to galvanise Muslim and non-Muslim women living abroad to support their struggles, constituted the beginning of what has become later a huge network of Muslim feminists around the globe. Likewise, *Musawah* (equality), an organization which identifies itself as the 'global movement for equality and justice in the Muslim family,' called for the enactment of laws to support equal gender rights (Badran, 2010, p. xviii).

Post-modernism, Third World feminism and critiques from other women on the margins have resulted in the development of varying understandings and different articulations of feminism over the last two decades, reconfiguring its contours to become more attuned to specificities of different groups of women. Examining the practical challenges of women organizing across race, class and gender, Nancy Naples (1998) highlights the need for new definitions, categories and analytical frameworks to include the variety of ways women participate in social change. And while her earlier focus was on the distinction between 'Western' and Third-World feminist practices, Chandra Talpade

Mohanty later chooses to call for an anti-capitalist transnational feminist practice, 'on the possibilities, indeed, on the necessities of cross-national feminist solidarity' and organizing against global capitalism (Mohanty, 2002, p. 509). Miriam Cooke (Cooke, 2001, p. 109) refers to this notion as engaging in a space of 'multiple critique' where 'post-colonial subjects articulate an oppositional discourse that simultaneously targets local and global antagonists' (p. 109). She argues that this multiple critique shifts the binaries that lock critical engagements into opposing poles to a space of multiplicity where various contestations can be addressed simultaneously. Sa'diyyah Shaikh (2003, p. 155) notes that 'Muslim women and men with feminist commitments need to navigate the terrain between being critical of sexist interpretations of Islam and patriarchy in their religious communities, while simultaneously criticizing neo-colonial feminist discourses on Islam.'

By connecting three main streams of scholarship: globalization; non-governmental organizations and global social movements; and women's movements and organizations, Valentine Moghadam (2005) presents a detailed analysis of how global processes such as the feminisation of poverty, the feminisation of labour, the globalization of women's rights, sub-regional coalitions, militarisation and war, the rise of religious fundamentalism and middle-class women's access to information technologies have shaped the rise and politics of major Transnational Feminist Networks (TFNs) during the past two decades. By bringing together assessments of Islamic fundamentalism and neoliberal capitalism as two key features of globalization that have resulted in transnational feminist responses, she creates new analysis of issues that were previously discussed separately. Inspired by the 'cultural turn,' she asserts the significance of networks for women, 'whether in the form of micro-level personal relations that spawn formal groups and organizations, or macro-level organizations that operate transnationally' (p. 196). Notwithstanding, she provides little insight into the ways in which TFNs maintain and build solidarities in the face of class, racial and gender disparities.

Within the latter works, two issues continue to generate tension. On the one hand, growing interests in questions of globalization, neo-liberalism and social justice did fuel the emergence and growth of transnational feminisms. On the other hand, ongoing debates

over questions of voice, authority, representation and identity continue to create a gap between the efforts of various feminists depending on their location and privilege (Swarr & Nagar, 2010). In attempting to mediate the divides amongst Muslim feminist theorizing and practice, Jasmin Zine (2006, p. 17) suggests a 'critical faith-based' approach that develops an understanding of how religious and spiritual identifications represent sites of oppression and are connected to broader sites of oppression based on race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality and colonialism, while acknowledging that religion has at times been historically misused. Attempting to dismantle and address the various interlocking systems of oppression and challenge the 'hierarchies of racialized and class-based dominance that that ideologically and structurally sustain social difference and inequality (ibid, p. 18) this framework, she argues allows for the analysis of these interlocking systems as they intersect within the lived experiences of various groups. In other words, she argues that what should unite otherwise diversely positioned and oriented Muslim women are the 'common struggles with neo-imperialism and extreme religious puritanism' (ibid).

Another is a suggestion that a more collaborative space be rooted in a 'strategic-integrative approach' (Chishti, 2002). This approach is based on developing more unified analysis of the multiple challenges, oppressions and injustices that various Muslim women face and building active and strategic solidarities in both local and transnational contexts to form a basis for political resistance. In Maliha Chishti's argument, this helps in putting an end to the false homogenisation of Muslim women's ideologies or religious orientations and allows for divergences while developing common platforms for social action and political critique. A prerequisite of such a project is the recognition of the limits of these suggestions and the acknowledgement of both the common as well as the conflicting frames that are invoked from these often competing and contradictory sites. In reality, however, Muslim women's organizing has not fully capitalized on opportunities to build such transnational links.

Ella Shohat points out in *Talking Visions*, to what she terms 'multicultural feminisms,' the reality that connections, borders and passports are under surveillance is a constant reminder that some connections are easier to make than others in a world

'simultaneously undergoing globalization and fragmentation' (Shohat, 1998, p. 15). How can feminists then help to redefine the boundaries of transnational solidarity when its terms are highly contested? In their introduction to *Critical Transnational Feminist Praxis*, Amanda Lock Swarr and Richa Nagar (2010, p. 12) claim that transnational feminist studies is a 'necessarily unstable field that must contest its very definition to be useful.' They argue that the 'limelight bestowed on a single activist does not change the reality that all activism is collectively constituted' (ibid, p. 1). In much of the same way, the voices of a few celebrated activists by no means erase or undermine the voices of those working from a grassroots position. In this sense, transnational feminism could become an initial step in what feminists might see as a long-term collaborative journey with one another. Along these lines, Amanda Lock Swarr and Richa Nagar (2010, p. 12) suggest that transnational feminist collaboration must be critically interrogated as we work and that this should be done with the primary purpose of generating new debates that may bring together feminists from various locations. By finding ways in which we are able to recognize connections without necessarily homogenizing the diversity and differences, we may be able to challenge dominant narratives that portray 'all' Muslim women as victims, yet do not position them as a single simplistic identity–it's not a flipside of Muslim women are not oppressed but liberated. Thereby, I will end this section with Kiran Grewal's words:

> It is we who assert a commitment to both anti-racism and feminism that must find appropriate ways to respond to [contested voices] in order not to fall into the very trap of doing what we have so long worked to critique: silencing a different and challenging voice (Grewal, 2012, p. 589).

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the complex interactions of race, gender and religion in the historical representations of women in colonial India and colonial Algeria, revealing how the concepts of 'othering' have placed women in both ex-colonies as helpless voiceless victims of their patriarchal cultures. It has also examined how the continuing legacies of

these encounters implicate the positioning of Muslim women in Britain and France within the historical and contemporary representations related to war, violence and empire building. Evidence suggests that colonial images of Muslim women have been transported (over time) to the postcolonial and French British contexts and reconfigured as a racialized discourse. Thus, Western feminists' use of Orientalism in describing, for example, *hijab,* has been criticized by postcolonial feminists due to its involvement in the 'Othering' process, through speaking for Third World women. However, as a result of the growth of fundamentalist movements in Muslim societies and the rise of the right wing in the west, women's rights and autonomy have suffered the consequences. The second part of the chapter have examined how neo-orientalist writing has gained increasing currency since the rise of 'Islamism' globally and how the latter racial and ethnic categorizations that occupied the public discourse in post-war Britain and France were gradually eclipsed by the emergence of fundamentalist movements from the early 1990s onwards. As such, analysing the agency of women particularly in the context of religion and the various ways in which Muslim feminists engage with and resist the coexistent factors of both imperial and fundamentalist domination, has raised new questions. What this complex, uneven and contradictory matrix of discourses, institutional spheres and terrains has pointed to is a need for a more nuanced conceptualisation of Muslim women's activism. The historical contextualization of Muslim women's experiences enables us to understand their position, with all the complexities involved, along the axes of class and religion, in contemporary society. Such a reading is particularly significant with reference to race, culture and multicultural understandings, facilitating a departure from problematic binary understandings of passivity or 'full' agency.

Recently, several feminist endeavours have called for new understandings of the ways we think about feminism and the broad classifications of Muslim women as a coherent group across contexts regardless of class, religion or ethnicity. Emphasising the idea that challenging the colonial narrative continues to be a key battle for confronting new manifestations of colonialism, it is vitally important to understand the complex relationship of transnational women activists to the various contexts they occupy. Although my research is not the first to emphasise that Muslim women's activism is immensely diverse and

complex, it is the first to explore the activism of Muslim women within this particular arena that induces mistrust and uncertainty about their place within the setting of traditions and authenticity on one hand and Western ideals of modernity on the other. It draws on a growing number of works that challenge how we think, write and speak about women's activism and the contexts in which they are formed, by studying their narratives and the conditions under which these narratives are created. Narrative theory offers ways to take into account gender, structure and agency in new ways. It offers ways to think about how both discursive and material aspects shape women's activism and looks beyond the dualities of agency versus subordination. Finally, narrative studies offer possibilities for exploring transnational connections, since individual stories reflect their histories. The politics of representation in the 'war on terror' mask the fact that there are multiple and interlocking forms of 'terror' that need to be combated. In this sense, we must seek to develop strategic linkages among ourselves and others to shift the current terms of engagement in the 'war on terror' toward a war against the multiple and intersecting terrors that are woven through the new world order. It is by listening to different voices that we can achieve this.

III. SITUATING FEMINIST METHODOLOGIES: THE RESEARCH PROCESS

This chapter provides a reflexive account of the epistemological and methodological approaches employed in this research. It includes both the conceptual framework and the practical element. It is here that epistemological and ontological understandings are brought forth, together with a more contemporary consideration of the production of knowledge which draws on everyday experiences of Muslim women. The chapter is divided into several sections. As feminist research is guided by feminist theory, the first section seeks to consider the construction of a transnational feminist approach to research. It employs intersectionality which pays particular attention to layered forms of oppression, accounting for the interplay of identities at the intersections of race, sex, class, sexual orientation, or other characteristics. In empirical research, these complexities require a high level of methodological reflexivity, which entails continuous attention and reflection on 'positioning,' including the positioning of the researcher (Carstensen-Egwuom, 2014). The second section discusses the research approach used in examining the research questions informed by feminist epistemologies and standpoints and the ethical considerations envisioned in this study. The third section provides an account of entry to the field, followed by an explanation of the process of selection of my two case studies, a description of the data on which I draw on—narratively-informed life story interviews; newspaper articles; videos; and social media accounts—and a discussion of the methods employed in the interpretation and analysis of this data. I conclude with a brief examination of the question of rigour and the limitations of this research.

FEMINISM AS AN ANALYTICAL TOOL

Grounding the empirical focus is vital to all research as it provides the frameworks from which the research is born, developed and deliberated. Here, the research follows a feminist

methodology which is situated in feminist theories. As Caroline Ramazanoglu & Janet Holland (2002) explicate, decisions about methodology are particularly powerful in the politics and practices of knowledge production. This is especially pertinent when designing a feminist research project, as it has consistently challenged traditional research paradigms and sought to expose the androcentric and patriarchal interests that they have served (Fonow & Cook, 1991).

While there is no single feminist epistemology, methodology or method (Hesse-Biber, 2014), attempts have been made to identify the commonalities shared by feminist research and to develop guiding principles of feminist methodology (Fonow & Cook, 1991). Yet, whereas notions of difference have long constituted important issues for feminist theory, politics and practice, 'the overriding preoccupation with sexism have far too often resulted in feminist ignoring differences of race, class, ethnicity, age (dis)ability, sexuality and nationality' (Reay, 2012, p. 628). As a result, some feminist researchers attempted to theorize and critique the western representations of the 'Rest'[16] and the concerns over gender, race, ethnicity and class (among other) relations (Mohanty, 1984; Spivak, 1993; Collins, 2000). Patricia Hill Collins (2000) suggests that only by exploring the complex matrix of difference that we can truly understand women's lived experiences. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) coins the term 'intersectionality' to speak to the multiple social forces, social identities and ideological instruments through which power and disadvantage are expressed and legitimised. Similarly, feminist postmodernists, poststructuralists and postcolonialists 'highlight the variations of women's lives and identities' (Frost & Elichaoff, 2014, p. 42), bringing 'the other' into research while deconstructing oppositional categories of man versus woman, black versus white, the West versus the Rest and so on (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002).

For some contemporary feminists, postmodernism (Inclusive of poststructuralism) is 'an extension to the feminist project' (Hesse-Biber, Leavy, & Yaiser, 2004, p. 18), as it liberates them from accepting the existence of one 'essential' truth, celebrating the

16. The West/Rest concept has also been discussed as North/South, First/Third world and One-third/Two-thirds arguments to highlight different postcolonial histories, conditions and experiences.

multiplicity of subjective, relative truths (Frost & Elichaoff, 2014, p. 43; see also Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). Poststructuralists, among which Foucault, Derrida and Lacan recognize that reality is socially constructed and influenced by different power interests and perceive knowledge as 'socially produced, unstable and ccontextualized' (Frost & Elichaoff, 2014, p. 43; Alcoff, 1988). In this sense, post-modernism opens the possibilities for women's experiences to be studied in relation to the context in which they take place 'rather than within a framework of assumed hegemonic norms that sees women as members of a group that is deviant from the norm' (Frost & Elichaoff, 2014, p. 45). Post-modernism uses the voice of the 'other' through a reflexive practice which accounts for the researcher's multiple subjectivities throughout and within the research process, the sociological and historical contexts and the changing power relations within which both the researcher and the researched operate (Hesse-Biber, Leavy, & Yaiser, 2004, p. 18).

Like postmodernism, postcolonialism have signified a sense of 'new times.' It emerged as a response to the homogenizing tendencies of western theories. It is true that the period of direct colonial occupation and rule by imperial powers has passed, yet it is undeniable that we are still 'left with processes and practices of domination as well as economic exploitation, all signifying present-day imperialism, sometimes called "neo-colonialism"' (Al-Ali, 2000, p. 20). Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1984) defines the Third World geographically as former colonies that, even though, have achieved independence, still remain under economic, political and cultural hegemony. Postcolonial feminists do not only critique the idea of a 'universal woman,' but also the reification of the third-world 'difference' that produces the 'monolithic' Third-World woman (Mohanty, 1984). Like black feminists, postcolonial feminists address wider issues of class, race and nationality that contribute to women's oppression. They also emphasise and analyse local politics and power relations over the universalising feminisms of the west.

For some feminists, the latter approaches appear to be problematic as they conflict with their essentialist categories of women's voice and women's experience and account for differences without privileging one particular gender, race or class over another (Rayaprol, 2016, p. 374). Nancy Naples (2003) cites Margery Wolf (1996) and Carolyn Sachs (1996)

concerns that the postmodern analysis of 'fractured identities' and the 'multitude of subjectivities could lead to 'total relativism' that precludes political activism (p. 23). In other words, the lack of a unifying philosophy and defined goals may threaten to minimize the impact of feminist commitment to societal and cultural change (Frost & Elichaoff, 2014). While this may be true for some, others perceive this critique as feminist postmodernism's greatest strength (Butler, 2006). In fact, postmodern feminists would assert that relying on 'essential' categories, in and of itself, is another way of reinforcing authority and standardising the prevailing stereotyping of gender 'without paying attention to the discursive fields in which gender becomes articulated' (Leavy, 2007, p. 101). While postcolonial feminism has contributed to feminist theorizing through concepts such as 'othering' and the silencing of Third World women's voices, a new discourse, namely; transnational feminism, may help us better 'understand new global realities resulting from migrations and the creation of transnational communities' (Marchand, 2009, p. 921). Perhaps the best example of this new discourse is Chandra Mohanty's revisiting of her seminal article 'Under Western Eyes' (Mohanty, 2002), in which she notes that while her earlier focus was on distinctions, she now chooses to focus on anti-capitalist transnational feminist methodologies to develop a universalism that speaks to improve all individual lives. Relying on a 'feminist solidarity' model that reveals what she calls the 'common differences,' she argues that it helps us recognize not only the differences but also the commonalities and the development of mutual consideration and understanding despite differing perspectives and experiences. This is further explicated in the following section.

CONSTRUCTING A TRANSNATIONAL FEMINIST METHOD

In this study, despite that I have started with what I believed to be a solid sense of method embedded in my postcolonial feminist commitment, I found my topic to be inhabiting uncertain ground, methodologically speaking. As I proceeded, I became aware of my positioning as a Middle Eastern activist/academic in relation to the transnational contexts and situations I was studying. Back in the Middle-East, studying Middle Eastern subjects

where both the researcher and researched are located within similar historical and political contexts (given that social contexts may differ), postcolonial feminism seemed to be a clear direction to pursue. In this study, the different levels of accessibility to people, places and resources in Britain and France and the varying historical and social contexts and representations drove me to acknowledge that my attempts to engage solely with postcolonial feminist methodologies would prove to be problematic. In this sense, my methodological principles began to transform. Transnational feminist paradigms draw on postcolonial feminist theories that emphasise the ways in which colonial legacies have shaped and continue to shape the social, economic and political oppression of people across the globe, as mentioned in the previous chapter. But they reject the idea that people from different regions have the same subjectivities and experiences. Nevertheless, they recognize that global capitalism has created similar relations of exploitation and inequality (Mohanty, 2013). In this sense, transnational feminist methods and theories may create a dialogue that enables feminists around the world to find solidarity and seek collaboration.

In this study, drawing on transnational feminist methods, I aim to address both questions of difference and commonality. I examine the experiences, struggles and challenges of secular Muslim women in the west, as they perceive it and narrate it. These women, their work, their lives and their experiences are not strictly located within the dominant western discourse of social and political activism (Taylor & Rupp, 1991), nor they are entirely located within what Chandra Mohanty (1984) describes as Third World Women's struggles. The factors that make up their identities and struggles have their own complex natures. In examining the experiences and activism of Muslim women, two representations exist; the Orientalist construction of the 'shimmering illusory images' of the Muslim woman as victimised and powerless and the postcolonial 'exuberant discussion of Muslim women's gender activism which represents "Muslim women" as empowered, militant and dignified citizens with a firmly integrated sense of self' (Moghissi, 1999, p. 49). Haideh Moghissi (1999, p. 50) cautions that both images might produce contradictory consequences:

> Whatever its roots, this intellectual trend might prove too costly for the individuals or societies studied. The newly manufactured image of strong Muslim women in active negotiation with a Muslim male elite might produce contradictory consequences. It might ornament gender experience under Islamic fundamentalism and mystify the consequences of non-compliance for women who do not share the same beliefs of their Muslim sisters.

Perhaps the most powerful impact of postmodernism and poststructuralism is the challenging of all means of totalising metatheories and universalism. On this view, there is no single, superior way of knowing and being. Our moral and ethnic judgements are usually rooted in biased standards. Indeed, human needs are diverse; what appears as desirable somewhere could be the opposite in another. Various cultures move in different directions and proceed at different speeds. Inspired by postmodernism, the growing scholarship on transnational feminism has been shaped by debates over how to name and describe feminist-inspired action that crosses national borders; how to acknowledge the multiple power differentials that exist among women 'while still allowing for concerted political action' (Adams & Thomas, 2010). The term 'transnational' emphasises that, even as women across borders are coming together, national and regional differences persist. It is a reaction and rejection of terms like 'international' and 'global' feminism (Grewal & Kaplan, 1994; Mohanty, 2003). It is also attentive to feminism as both a liberatory formation and a practice that has been oppressed by and sometimes been complicit with colonialism, racism and imperialism. As such, it resists utopian articulations of 'global sisterhood' while simultaneously working to lay the groundwork for more productive and equitable social relations among women across borders and cultural contexts. Both transnational theories and feminist activist practices are concerned with the ways globalization and capitalism affect women across nations, races, genders, classes, sexualities and more (Grewal & Kaplan, 1994; Mohanty, 2013).

The popularization of transnational feminisms in feminist/women's and gender studies has coincided with a commitment to address the disparities of globalization. Yet, it would be incorrect to suggest that the term has the same salience in the global South and the global North. Similar to all other feminisms, transnational has emerged out of certain

historical moments (Swarr & Nagar, 2010). Viewed this way, it is critical to be aware of the limits of its use. Indeed, Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (2001, p. 664) argue that the term transnational 'has become so ubiquitous in cultural, literary and critical studies that much of its political valence seems to have become evacuated.' In their discussion of transnational sexuality studies, they specify at least five points of focus where the term transnational has gained currency, among which are; 1- to theorize migration as a transnational process; 2- to mark the demise or irrelevance of the nation-state in the current phase of globalization; 3- as a synonym for diasporic; 4- to designate a form of postcolonialism; and 5- as an alternative to the problematic of the global and the international, articulated primarily by Western second-wave feminists and also by multinational corporations, for which 'becoming global' marks an expansion into new markets. It is in this sense that I am concerned with the idea of transnational feminisms in this chapter—'as a conceptual framework that strives to liberate itself from the political and intellectual constraints of international feminisms and global feminisms' (Swarr & Nagar, 2010, p. 4). In the introduction to *Critical Transnational Feminist Praxis,* Amanda Lock Swarr and Richa Nagar (2010, p. 5) propose to employ transnational feminisms as an intersectional set of understandings, tools and practices that can:

> (a) attend to racialized, classed, masculinized and heteronormative logics and practices of globalization and capitalist patriarchies and the multiple ways in which they (re)structure colonial and neo-colonial relations of domination and subordination; (b) grapple with the complex and contradictory ways in which these processes both inform and are shaped by a range of subjectivities and understandings of individual and collective agency; and (c) interweave critiques, actions and self-reflexivity so as to resist a priori predictions of what might constitute feminist politics in a given place and time.

With respect to the latter, by employing a theoretical assumption that places diverse women's experience as the first point of knowledge production, while avoiding the exclusion of the context from the data and findings, acknowledging its limitations, I envision this as a crucial step to forming a solidarity within feminism that does not erase the lived experiences of different, marginalised or contested groups. I engage with feminist

transnational approaches to explore the experiences, knowledges and perspectives of a particular group of women largely ignored by mainstream western feminist scholars and scholars of social movements (Taylor & Rupp, 1991; Gould, 2004; Polletta, 2006), maintaining that there is no one woman's voice, in fact, there is no one Muslim woman's voice, placing emphasis on narratives and the rejection of metanarratives and the study of discourse to reflect the distribution of power in society. As a researcher, while aiming to demonstrate attentiveness and reflexivity throughout the research process, I suggest that a transnational approach be employed as a dynamic construct through which praxis can acquire its meaning and form in a given place, time and struggle. I strive to strengthen the process of this research by engaging in continuous commitment to producing a self-reflexive critique of my own practices rather than a search for resolutions or closures.

Intersectionality as a Method

Intersectionality is an analytical and political orientation that brings together several insights and practices developed largely in the context of Black feminist and women of colour theoretical and political traditions (May, 2015). The term was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) and popularized by Patricia Hill Collins (2000). It denotes the various ways in which social forces interact to shape the multiple dimensions of experience (Crenshaw, 1989) and reflects on interlocking systems of oppression such as race, class, gender, ethnicity and so on (Collins, 2000). In other words, inequities are never the result of a single, distinct factor. Rather, they are the outcome of the intersection of different social locations, power relations and experiences. It is through these intersections that positions are constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed. In this study, I use an intersectional approach to consider how the women whose stories are recounted multiple positions including ethnic, educational, class-based, gendered, religious and national identities operate to produce their experiences in relation to others. An intersectional research strategy should highlight the everyday interactions and processes that create ethnic, gendered and other identity categories; while at the same time, disrupt these categories and

processes (Collins & Bilge, 2016). This requires identifying relevant social categories and interrogating these within the stories narrated as well as within the researcher-participant interaction and relationship.

But how to do this? First, the interview questions must allow for intersectional processes to be investigated. For example; 'what are the challenges you experience as a non-western woman doing activism within a western context?' asks the experiences at the intersection of being a woman and being non-western. Second, reflecting critically upon categories by exploring answers to several questions like; who is included and excluded in the categories; what is the role of inequality and power in creating these categories; and what are the similarities and differences between the categories, is a vital step (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Third, is to approach the data from different perspectives; read it several times, each time with a different main question in mind. Using intersectionality as a methodological and analytical tool, thus, introduces an element of complexity into the analysis of the data, which can foster a better understanding of the emerging and growing global and transnational inequalities (Collins & Bilge, 2016). On the one hand, it sheds light on social relations of dominance that are underexplored in the everyday experience of women. On the other hand, it allows personal experience to challenge and extend pre-determined understandings of power, inequality and difference (Carstensen-Egwuom, 2014). But when using intersectionality to empirically analyse social positionalities, researchers are confronted with different questions: How does one determine which categories of difference should be looked at? How does one ensure that an intersectionality approach does not re-essentialise pre-determined, fixed categories, but looks at their interaction and mutual constitution instead? In this thesis, I use a reflexive approach to answer these questions. This kind of reflexivity is firmly based in ethnographic research practice and stresses on being self-reflexive about how to bring theories and categories into conversation with empirical realities (Carstensen-Egwuom, 2014).

REFLEXIVITY AND VOICE

Reflexivity and the ways in which our subjectivity becomes entangled in the lives of others (Denzin, 2001) has concerned sociologists, anthropologists and feminist scholars for decades (Hertz, 1997). Feminist scholars have been particularly vocal on this point and reflexivity has come to be regarded as one of the pivotal themes in discussions of feminist research (Fonow & Cook, 1991; Naples, 2003; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). Most feminist researchers openly reflect on, acknowledge and document their social location and the roles they play in co-creating data and in constructing knowledges (Harding, 1987; Wolf, 1996; Hertz, 1997). Following these scholars, rather than dismissing the significance of how my own biography, social background and assumptions influence the research process and the construction of intersubjective research relations which, in different ways, affect the text and its interpretation, I embrace and account for them in support of gaining newer and deeper insights and understandings of the complexity and variations of my research subjects' cultural, historical, geopolitical and personal constructs in relation to the worlds they inhabit.

My first meeting with Sara Khan involved reciprocal conversations about how our backgrounds aided in shaping our perceived ideologies as 'eccentric,' which in turn affected the nature of our activism. We discussed both our commonalities and our differences, yet we had felt more related than different. At the end of the meeting, Sara told me 'I believe that this research encounter will educate me about your experiences and activism, as much as it will educate you about mine.' In view of that, throughout the research process, I constantly asked myself in what material ways am I benefiting from this research in relation to those involved? In what ways do I have authority to assess the situations I am engaging with during research? And am I continuing to be dedicated to a commitment to social change? Employing reflexive strategies was of significance to me in carrying out my research within this transnational setting specifically by acknowledging context, history and mutually constituting relationships while exploring women's different as well as similar experiences in different spaces. Coming from a different geopolitical context myself, this process of

defining research relationships occurred through the experiences, interactions and circumstances that transpired during the fieldwork. Reflecting upon the role of post-structural theory in realizing the significance of social and material world in the production of knowledge, as well, became a useful conceptual foundation (Frost & Elichaoff, 2014). As Bev Gatenby & Maria Humphries (2000, p. 90) argue, 'researchers are not separate, neutral academics theorizing about others, but co-researchers or collaborators with people working towards social equality.' Jack D. Douglas (1985, p. 25) refers to this exchange as a 'creative search for mutual understanding.' Our research subjects react to us, not only as researchers but as individuals with ideas and identities.

The time I spent doing research resulted in various aspects of my own identity coming to the fore that were different in Britain and France (Wolf, 1996, p. 11). These reflections led me to consider another vital aspect of feminist methodology, particularly salient in transnational research, which is the concept of insider/outsider. Nancy Naples (2003) discusses what she called 'the shifting nature of insider/outsider status' arguing that researcher/researched relationship is more fluid than to be described in a simple dichotomy of insider/outsider status. In this research, a dichotomous approach to understanding the relationship between insider and outsider was not appropriate in that I was, in varying instances, simultaneously both insider and outsider in relation to my research subjects. Furthermore, my own sense of insider-ness or outsider-ness changed significantly over time. In my fieldwork, I experienced relationships that swung between 'closeness' at times and 'distance' at other times. I had minimal control over these experiences. Working and re-working my position within the research continued throughout the fieldwork, the data analysis and the write-up, through which a unique context of learning and unlearning prejudices, fears and conflicts were developed (Bloom, 1997). To conclude, reflexive research practice helped me improve the quality of my research, by raising questions about the research process (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p. 201), consequently aiding readers the ability to evaluate the appropriateness of the research findings. The provision of a reflexive account of decisions made regarding the selection of methods, data analysis and interpretation of research findings, helps other researchers replicate the study. The transparency in narrating

the actual process of knowledge production and the subjectivities and identities that constitutes my voice is crucial to the feminist project of which I am a part.

Ethics of Representation

The key aspects of procedural ethical practices reviewed by social research governance are: 1- Preventing harm and maximizing benefit; ensuring honesty and transparency 2- Ensuring confidentiality, privacy and anonymity; 3- Ensuring the respect for individual autonomy and obtaining free and informed consent; 4- Disclosure and potential for deception and; 5- Ensuring respect for human dignity (Murphy & Dingwall, 2001; Bell, 2014). With regards to the latter key aspects, a successful application was made to the University of Kent's Research Ethics Committee, in December 2016 before the beginning of my fieldwork. Participants were given my details and were informed about the specific nature of the project and the data collected (interview transcripts, documentary data and social media posts) before the interview being conducted and asked to read and sign a consent form. Additionally, I was aware that informed consent is an ongoing process, in which I was continuously reflexive and regularly checking that participants are comfortable and happy to continue and ensuring that they understand that they can stop or pause their participation at any time. As a matter of fact, this happened with two of my participants who did not wish to continue and thus not mentioned in this thesis at all. Procedures for securing the data generated during the period of this research included; limiting the accessibility of the generated data only to myself; and transcribing the recorded interviews personally without seeking the help of any transcriber(s).

In this study, issues of confidentiality and anonymity took a different route, as the women I interviewed were all public figures who agree, expect and demand to have their real names used overtly in my dissertation. However, as mentioned in the introduction, other issues continued to resurface. Considering the consequences that the publishing of this thesis might create for these women, even though they signed consent forms was a dilemma I continued to face throughout the writing of this thesis. I repeatedly asked myself

whether or not it is safe to display their real names as it might make these women vulnerable with respect to possible responses from their families, friends and communities. As I was and continued to be in touch with these women, I constantly discussed with them the contents of my thesis ensuring they continue to agree on having their names published. These women have made themselves vulnerable by sharing certain personal and painful memories with me taking the risk of facing further backlash once this study is made public. Therefore, I decided to omit some extremely personal stories to assure that 'no harm' is inflicted on the narrators of these stories by the publishing of this work.

While feminist researchers have not been the only ones to pursue reflexivity in the politics of empirical research practice, it is reasonable to say that such reflexivity is a substantial feature of feminist research processes, representing 'empirical engagement with the practice of ethics' (Edwards & Mauthner, 2012, p. 15). A feminist researcher reflects a special concern with conducting research concerned with personal lives, 'grounded in individual experiences' and built on a particular theoretical and methodological perspective 'that we continue to call "feminist" despite the breadth and evolution of the term' (Birch, et al., 2012, p. 5). Whereas all ethical models contribute to 'ethical knowing,' the feminist model draws upon a reflexive approach that 'moves beyond a model of reasoning and rationality and enables the acknowledgement of feelings and emotions' (Birch, et al., 2012, p. 6). In the section on reflexivity, I have raised issues of power relations and anti-exploitative practices. As a woman activist who is critical of sexist interpretations of Islam and patriarchy in my religious communities, studying women with similar convictions, all of whom are educated to a minimum of a degree level, the potential that a power differential impacts the research may not have been immediately evident. What is at stake here is that as a researcher, the responsibility of interpreting, representing and authoring the views, standpoints, actions and experiences of those I study gives me the ultimate authority over the knowledge production that develops from the research process.

One has to admit that from the moment we engage in the research process, through probing, asking questions, transcribing, etc. the voices of those who tell their stories are already being interpreted. Representation in ethnography is embedded in power relations

and can produce imperialist tendencies in the representation of the research subjects and their knowledge, experiences and ideologies (Spivak, 1993). Gayatri Spivak (1993) argues that many researches end up producing the same dominant forms of knowing they aimed to dismantle. In attempting to resolve this dilemma, Lorraine Nencel (2014) argues that reflexivity should be performed situatedly, depending on the contextuality of the research process, which allows the representation of both actors as well as their relationship to flow out of the particularities of the research context/process' (p. 76). In this particular project, it was a difficult task to find the balance between interpreting and analysing the text and letting the stories speak for themselves. My main objective was to represent the complexity of the everyday life, challenges and ideologies of the women whose stories are recounted here, as they themselves perceive it. Because of the backlash these women face as a result of their activism (discussed in detail later), I was committed to not becoming yet another burden to them by misrepresenting or misinterpreting their stories. My writing, thus, aimed at giving these women the space to represent themselves the way they wanted and instead of interpreting what they said, I give insights into their everyday lives and ideologies. And even though I shared with these women my own narratives, the decision was not to write myself in these stories but to separate my own narrative which I recounted in the preface of this thesis. My role as an interpreter, thus, was dedicated, in part, to creating a 'bricolage' of these experiences (Nencel, 2014).

RESEARCH DESIGN

Liz Kelly, et al. (1994) asserts that methods are not created by feminists per se, but the approach to employing them is, in fact, informed by feminist epistemologies and standpoints. Acknowledging the fact that case study research method can embrace different epistemological approaches, in this project, I employ a case study approach that embraces the feminist commitment that guides this study (discussed earlier). Unlike studies that seek generalisations through the collection of a large number of instances, a case study 'refers to research that focuses on a single case or single issue' (Reinharz, 1992, p. 164). Feminist case

studies, in particular, involve a 'fully developed description of a single event, person, group, organization, or community' (ibid). They are used to illustrate and explain the process of a development of infrequent 'exceptional' cases over time, by looking for 'specificity, exceptions and completeness' (Reinharz, 1992, p. 174). David Snow & Danny Trom (2002) identify central characteristics of the case study in relation to the study of social movements in particular. They stipulate that a case study seeks to 'generate a richly detailed and 'thick' elaboration of the phenomenon studied through' (p. 147). David Snow & Leon Anderson (1991, p. 152) conceptualize case studies as 'holistic understanding of cultural systems of action,' thus focusing more concretely on the ccontextualized and embedded character of the social actions, events and processes, which constitutes the elements of analysis. Finally, a case study uses multiple methods or procedures of data collection that include–but are not limited to–qualitative techniques (Snow & Trom, 2002).

In this study, my aim is to document secular Muslim women activists' experiences, knowledge and perspectives through detailed and in-depth investigation of my selected cases; *Inspire* and *Brigade de Mères*. The decision to adopt a case study approach, foremost, is to record 'the very existence' of these organizations (Reinharz, 1992, p. 171) and to challenge mainstream contribution of the invisibility of women's accomplishments in academic records, as well as transnational feminist neglect of this particular type of activism. There are possible limitations in employing a case study approach. The presumption that a case study, in and of itself, does not allow for or facilitate generalisation is one of its main weaknesses. David Snow & Danny Trom (2002) assert that this is 'neither absolutely true nor false' (p. 164). They stress that generalisability depends on the kind of generalisation in question and the type of case study. Case study approach is clearly unsuited for statistical generalisation; however, it can possibly seek analytical or theoretical generalisation (Yin, 2014). David Snow & Danny Trom (2002) discuss three types of theoretical generalisations: theoretical discovery that emerges from grounded theory; theoretical extension that extends existing formulations to new or different social categories, contexts or processes and; theoretical refinement—as in this study—which involves the modification of an existing theoretical perspective with new case material. More specifically, my research highlights the

importance of interconnected/interactive explanation of outcomes rather than single-theory explanations.

ENTERING THE FIELD

In relation to empirical research, Brooke Harrington (2003, p. 599) distinguishes between the concepts of 'access,' which relate to 'the social scientific goals' of the study; 'entry,' which refers to 'the initial act of entering the field or gaining permission,' and 'rapport,' which implies 'the quality of the researcher-participant relationship.' Along these lines, access to the field began with selecting and locating my case studies. Nowadays searching the world wide web makes locating such public figures and contacting them a relatively stress-free one. Following some online research, I succeeded in getting access to two organizations involved in battling what they call 'radical Islamism' and 'violent extremism.' The fact that they are based in two different European countries, as mentioned in the introduction, contributes to an additional depth that owes to the varied contexts, backgrounds and experiences of each. Achieving positive responses or 'gaining permission' (Harrington, 2003, p. 599), however, involved some effort. Knowing previously that there were ideological commonalities between me and these women activists, made me believe that winning their attention and interest will be a hassle-free step. As William Shaffir & Robert Stebbins (1991, p. 26) put it, 'the chances of getting permission to undertake the research are increased when the researcher's interest appears to coincide with those of the subjects.' I was wrong; I did not receive any prompt responses to my initial emails. The fact that this particular arena of activism among Muslim women is uncommon, replacing them would have been a tough job. This was one of the 'critical moments' in my research (Horsfall, et al., 2001). Without the permission of these two notable women, the project might have been terminated. Feelings of self-doubt, nervousness and insecurity were what I recall from those first few months.

Before sending a follow-up email, I reflected on what I've written in my first email. Aside from being brief and straight to the point, which might have been perceived as a sign

of thoughtlessness or disrespect, I realized that I have mentioned nothing about myself, my identity, my background, etc. How am I supposed to expect them to relate to my interests and ideologies if I have not mentioned them in the first place? I had no intention to conceal my 'story;' I was simply not confident of whether these 'busy' women will have any interest in it. Searching guidance on the subject of negotiating entry to the field from texts, articles and books, I have often found it not very helpful. Although general guidelines were offered (Hesse-Biber, 2014), the specificity of each setting and the researcher's personal circumstances were almost impossible to find in texts. After some thought and consultations, I wrote a follow-up email, roughly 300 words, in which I described the significance of this project to me, my experiences, my struggles and my commitments to social change. I recounted a brief personal history unfolding my journey to activism and the obstacles I faced within my own society as a result of my particular ideologies. To my surprise I received an immediate response showing interest, not only in my research, but also in my activism. My first encounter with Sara was a brief meeting, in a public café, through which I explained my research in some detail and answered her questions that revolved around women's status in Muslim majority countries and the nature of women's activism there. In retrospect, this first meeting that was worrying me went much better than I expected. Sara appeared to be very receptive to participating in my research than I anticipated. The same scenario took place with Henna Rai and Tehmina Kazi, Sara's associates, except that I learned from my first experience.

In the case of Nadia Remadna, the language barrier, as well as the distance, were two setbacks that I have not experienced with Sara. I took on a different approach; I decided to seek the assistance of what some call 'a gatekeeper'[17]. I was lucky to have gained contact with Emma Kate Symons—a journalist who happened to have written an article about Nadia—through my supervisor Dr Simon Cottee. I contacted her and she, in turn, directed me to Marie-Laure Brossier, a French activist who worked with Nadia. It took three months from the first email to–finally–meet Nadia in Paris. I started my fieldwork in an earlier trip

17. Ethnographers frequently refer to individuals who hold key positions either formally or informally within the environment and help facilitate their access to people and information as gatekeepers (Buch & Staller, 2014, p. 123).

to Paris through which I interviewed two Muslim women activists who worked with Nadia, also introduced to me by Marie-Laure. In my first field trip, I met with Serenade Chafik, a French Egyptian activist who collaborated with Nadia earlier. Establishing rapport with Serenade was effortless; we spoke the same language, came from the same country; and shared similar ideologies. During that same trip, I met Aziza Sayeh, a French Tunisian activist and mother of an ISIS foreign fighter who recently died in Syria. A struggle I experienced with Aziza was a difficulty understanding her Tunisian Arabic dialect. It took me more time to listen and relisten to our recorded interviews while transcribing to pick every single word in the Tunisian dialect, yet unsurprisingly, many of the figures of speech, sayings and expressions she used had equivalents in my Egyptian dialect.

Finally, a meeting with Nadia was arranged. Due to her constricting schedule, I had to fly for one night to Paris to see her. Because of the time and energy exerted to conduct this first meeting, I was cautious not to overwhelm her with my research demands, so I decided to, first, establish sufficient rapport, then arrange a longer trip to conduct my second interview. The moment I met her and began to communicate in spoken Arabic language, I realized I understood her Algerian dialect much easier than I did with Aziza, which was a huge relief. I spent the whole day with her in the suburbs helping women, meeting lawyers, etc. Whereas that first encounter was exhausting, it ended up rewarding as I also had the chance to observe her activism in practice. At the end of the day, on our trip back to the city in the *Metro*, she told me 'I fell in love with you Hind; from now on, you can come and meet me whenever you want.' I believe that the success I had in establishing rapport with Nadia was also due to the commonalities we share, her interest in my personal story and her excitement to document her own activism.

In addition to the collection of life story interviews and the interactional context in which they are constructed and performed, I conducted interviews with co-workers. These interviews are considered discourses of which the narratives may be a part. In the context of social activism, co-workers may share skills, values and perspectives and often operate within shared professional frameworks. The decision to conduct life story narrative interviews with five of these women activists, while brief semi-structured interviews were

conducted with several women who had previously worked with either of the two organizations was a conscious decision taken on an individual basis. Decisions varied between the personal choices of some women not to share their life story, or others who simply did not consider themselves 'activists,' rather employees, or they were not Muslim. While I have no prejudice against non-Muslim women activists, this specific study sought to examine a particular arena of activism, namely that of secular Muslim women activists. In terms of rapport, Skype interviewing did not affect the quality of the conversations, however, it might have affected the length of the interview. Similarly, Skype interviewing did not raise any further ethical concerns; I had emailed them the consent form to sign and email back to me. All women agreed to contribute and each signed a consent form. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed by myself and women activists I interviewed agreed that all recorded content would be considered as data.

METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

Narratively-informed Life story[18] Interviews:

It is only recently that scholars started to use case study approaches that employed life story and narrative methods to examine subjective experiences (Wells, 2011). The potential of such a blend is that the researcher is able to connect subjective experiences to social contexts as 'they inevitably contain the embedded assumptions and patterns of reasoning that characterize the narrator's society' (Wells, 2011, p. 18). Some scholars argue that narratively-informed life story research, in particular, is best suited for studying 'personal transformations' which reveal how individuals and groups make sense of their experiences (Elliott, 2005). In this respect, the interview is designed so that it encourages the development of narratives, in which the narration form substitutes the question-answer form that defines most interview situations (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). Narratively-

18. There's a lack of uniformity of terminology concerning life-history; oral history, case studies, in-depth life-history interviews, biographical interviews, personal narratives, all have been used interchangeably (Reinharz, 1992). For the purpose of this thesis, I use the term 'life story narrative' as proposed by Ojermark (2007: 4) to refer to 'the account of a person's story of his or her life, or a segment of it, as told to another.'

informed interviews also take seriously the idea that language, as the medium of exchange, is not neutral but constitutes a particular worldview (ibid). Based on the idea of reconstructing social events from the point of view of the narrator, the influence of the interviewer in narrative should be minimal. In this case, what is used is the everyday communication of telling and listening to stories. It is conducted over several phases, starting with the initiation, moving through the narration and the questioning phase and ends with a concluding talk (ibid). The narratively-informed interview is, therefore, a technique that generates stories and, therefore, can be analysed in different ways after the capture and transcription of the data (ibid).

In my interviews, my questions were broad, such as 'can you walk me through your journey to activism?' This allowed the narrators to tell detailed stories and include particular elements that are of significance to them, achieving compelling formulation of the initial central topic designed to trigger 'self-sustainable' narration (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). Once this is established, based on the subjects of interests to the narrator, I brought up a list of 'exament' questions (ibid) that required thinking and reflection, such as issues of Islam and the west, secularism, backlash, etc. From this, I distinguished what Sandra Jovchelovitch & Martin Bauer (2000) call 'immanent' issues: the themes, topics and accounts of events that appeared during the narration. To accomplish this, I used a set of questions that cover topical areas: parents and homeland, childhood and home, family life, education, lifestyle, marriage and kids, life's major events and turning points, work and activism and finally ideology, all of which were broad and open-ended. My interview guide was written in detail and included many questions but, in reality, the interviews took varied patterns. In the case of Sara and Henna, I started by asking broad questions about their most recognized memories, which allowed them to speak about their experiences and subjectivities in the order they felt comfortable with. They narrated their stories chronologically, starting with their earliest memories of their childhood. In the cases of Nadia, Serenade and Aziza, interviews took a different order and form. Nadia's responses to stories related to her childhood and family were long and detailed, but her responses regarding her organization and activism were brief that I had to ask more questions and

rephrase at times. Unlike Sara and Henna, Nadia, Serenade and Aziza did not recount their life stories chronologically. They started with what they described as their life's turning points, which they saw as most important. At the end of the interview, interesting discussions often developed in the form of small-talk, which threw light on the entirety of their accounts. This contextual information proved in many cases to be very important for the interpretation of the data. During this phase, I used why-questions, which has eventually become my entry point for the analysis.

Most of the interviews conducted took the form of conversations, however, in the case of Sara, my interaction was limited, unlike Nadia's interviews which were far more conversational. In all cases, the repeated interviews made it easier to maintain greater rapport. I conducted multiple narratively-informed life story interviews with the five women whose stories are recounted in this thesis, as the data that was required was thorough, intense and covered three separate topics; formative years; paths to activism and; identity and ideology. Shulamit Reinharz (1992) argues that 'multiple interviews are likely to be more accurate than single interviews because of the opportunity to ask additional questions and to get corrective feedback on previously obtained information' (p. 37). The repeated interviews also allowed me to reflect on the data between one interview and the next, especially with the interviews conducted in France, as the difficulty in picking every single word during the interview, was diminished through the process of transcribing, through which I had the chance to reflect. Multiple interviewing, as Jane Elliott (2005, p. 32) argues, helps to establish the internal validity of the findings, by checking the consistency of the respondents throughout the interviews. Finally, I approached each of these women as a unique individual 'with her own specific history, identity, experiences, social relations and subjective understanding of her life and of the topic researched' (Undurraga, 2012). Despite that these women share many similarities; they have a variety of experiences that places them at different locations.

In constructing my interview transcripts, I included the interactional context. The decision to omit it from the written text was taken at a later stage. The transcribed text included repeated words and phrases, long and short pauses, hesitation marks (like hmm.)

as well as gestures (laughing, crying, coughing, etc). Transcribing played a major role in constructing the narrative data. In the case of Nadia, Aziza and Serenade, the interviews were conducted in the Arabic language. The process of constructing a transcript from a translated interview involved challenging interpretive decisions (Riessman, 2008). The interviews were first literally translated word for word. Then, I began to search for equivalent words in the English language that would not elude the original narrative from its sense of culture. My understanding of the North African culture, as a North African myself, facilitated this step. Nevertheless, transcripts of the interviews conducted in Arabic were revised, rewritten and transformed several times. It is worth noting, however, given the effort to produce transcripts that are close to the raw speech as possible, as Reissman (2008, p. 50) states that 'transcripts are by definition incomplete, partial and selective–constructed by an investigator.'

Documentary Material

Although interviews are important tools for gathering narrative data, narratives can be gathered from different forms of data collection such as documents, images and other sources. In this study, in addition to interviews, data was gathered through documentary evidence. Using documentary material already existing outside of this research is not only to supplement the data collected through my interviews, albeit, it is material that tell us indirectly about the social world of the ones who created or co-constructed them. A document, unlike a speech, Monageng Mogalakwe (2006, p. 222) argues 'have an independent existence beyond the writer and beyond the context of its production.' Documentary sources provide what John Scott (1990) characterizes as 'mediate access' which affords visible signs of what happened at some previous time. Such data detect any conflicting attitudes and interpretations of the same events and situations mentioned and discussed in the conducted interviews.

Several comment pieces for *The Guardian*, the *Independent*, *The Telegraph*, the *National UAE*, the *New York Times*, the *New Statesman*, *The Sun* and the *Huffington Post*, written by Sara Khan, Kalsoom Bashir and Henna Rai were collected. I gathered these

sources online from *Inspire's* web archive, which either had a reproduced copy of the original or had a link to the original article. In addition, several articles and videos interviewing Sara, from *Channel 4 News*, *Sky News*, *CNN*, *ITV News*, *BBC Woman's Hour* and *ITV's Loose Women* were obtained, all similarly found on *Inspire's* website. And finally, Sara's book *The Battle for British Islam: Reclaiming Muslim Identity from Extremism*, was also consulted. I also collected several articles written about Nadia Remadna, the work of the organization and its significance, all were posted on the organization's Facebook page. Among which are pieces for *Le Figaro, Le Devoir, La Parisienne and Le Point, Marie Claire*. Among articles published in English are for the *Financial Times, The Telegraph, Women in the World*. Additionally, Nadia Remadna's co-authored book Comment *J'ai Sauve Mais Enfants* (How I Saved My Children) was also consulted. These documents, when used, are referred to in footnotes throughout this thesis.

The general principles of handling documentary sources are no different from those applied to other areas of social research (Mogalakwe, 2006). However, scholars use some criteria to ensure the quality of the material collected. John Scott (1990) frames several selection criteria; authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning. Authenticity refers to a document's genuineness and includes considerations of fraud. This is in the same way that an interviewer must be sure of the identity of the interviewee (Mogalakwe, 2006, p. 225). Credibility goes into the motivations which produce a document and the evidence that the document provides. Representativeness refers to whether the evidence is typical of its kind (Mogalakwe, 2006). Finally, meaning which refers to whether the evidence is clear and comprehensive. The ultimate purpose of examining documents is to arrive at an understanding of the meaning and significance of what the document contains (Scott, 1990, p. 28). This is more difficult than we normally suppose. Everything from different languages, dialects, or styles of writing to entirely different cultural norms and values can interrupt interpretation of a text. The aid of a reader must be to enter 'into a dialogue with the author of the document being studied' so that we can be part of the 'hermeneutic circle' in which the text was composed (ibid, p. 31). Having said that, I made sure that the data I

collected accurately reflected these four criteria, before any decision to incorporate them in my research.

In addition to documents, I used digital technology to support my research, by drawing on textual cases from social media accounts owned and run by the two organizations understudy to explore and examine the narratives entrenched in them. A good reason for using social media accounts is that 'the full texts are readily available on the Web, so that the reader may explore them in full with minimal effort' (Alleyne, 2015, p. 9). Facebook and Twitter provide a vast collection of material which is already organized chronologically or thematically. I used *nCapture* for *NVivo* to collect and archive my data. An initial content analysis was conducted to filter 600 plus Facebook and Twitter posts. The posts selected from Facebook and Twitter were mainly used to supplement the narratives of the women interviewed; they were either referred by the women themselves, or posts relevant to the narratives that emerged from the interviews. This data, when used in my analysis and writing, is referred to in footnotes.

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF DATA

Rather than treating collection and analysis as separate and sequential steps, analysis began with the very act of entering the field, collecting documents, conducting interviews, writing memos, reflecting on the interviews, listening and re-listening to the interviews, transcribing, making notes of possible connections and reviewing transcripts in preparation for subsequent interviews. All the latter began long before the initiation of the formal process of uploading the data, resulting in an engagement that enhanced my understanding of meanings. In this sense, codes emerged gradually throughout the research process as comments by the women I interviewed resonated with or contrasted others or my own observations and experiences. The idea of co-constructing a narrative was a core objective since the early stages of this research. However, the development of a theoretical perspective that guides this approach has not materialized until later, after reading and rereading the first few transcripts, brainstorming and obviously, consulting ample feminist literature and

my supervisors. An early attempt at using *NVivo* to rationalise my analysis process, to streamline and centralise my storage of codes ended at the point of storing and initial coding, because it left me feeling cold. Although my substantive writing is always in the first instance typed, to know and understand my data I needed a physical copy, annotated with highlighters, page markers and post-it notes. From here it was a process of identifying and refining the narrative structure.

Several researchers suggest ways in which an interest in narrative might inform the analysis of textual material (Mishler, 1986; Elliott, 2005; Riessman, 1993; Riessman, 2008; Wells, 2011; Kim, 2016), yet there is no standard approach or list of procedures. A range of approaches to the analysis of narratives deal with narrative's content (what narrative says); narrative's structure (how narrative is put together to convey meaning); and the interactional context of narrative (pragmatics) (Mishler, 1986). Additionally, new approaches are emerging that focus on how narrative, its performance and its context are intertwined (Wells, 2011). The lines between these different forms and approaches are blurred. As this project steps into many discourses about the lives and work of secular Muslim women activists living in the west, I was interested in both the actual events and experiences that are recounted in the stories these women tell (i.e. the content of the narrative) and the ways in which these stories were put together (i.e. the structure of the narrative).

In chapter V, I sought to preserve these five stories in its entirety and understand each as a complete entity (Lieblich, et al., 1998), without precluding a sociological interest in social structures, norms and constraints (Elliott, 2005). Focusing on a single story holistically reveals useful information: the point of view of the teller; the social and cultural situation to which the teller is reactive; the sequence of past experiences and situations in the life of the teller (ibid). The first two stories were recounted chronologically, while the latter three were not. I have co-constructed these stories chronologically in a way that would make more sense to the reader, however, I still maintained and highlighted what was of most significance to the tellers of these stories. And while narratives reveal individual experiences and may shed light on their identities, they are also constitutive of the specific

socio-historical phenomena in which these biographies are rooted (Tamboukou, 2008). Thus, the objective of narrative analysis is to capture not only how the unfolding of events is described, but also the network of meanings that give the narrative its structure as a whole. The nonchronological aspects of a narrative correspond to explanations and reasons found behind the events, values, ideas and reflections attached to the narration (ibid). Accordingly, chapter VI and VII of this thesis aim to capture these meanings, looking at the narratives these women drew on when they described themselves, their politics, their activism and the challenges they face. In chapter VI, drawing on interviews as well as documentary material, I extracted sense-making coherent themes about feminism, secularism, religion, the 'War on Terror,' etc. reflecting on the ways these women positioned themselves, their politics and their work within the wider socio-political and historical debates they are embedded in. And in chapter VII, I explored the narratives these women drew on when they talk about their activism, which revolved around the challenges they face. These women's narratives showed that they negotiated complex choices which were not only limited by material social structures, but by their own senses of being whom they saw themselves to be.

In these chapters, I aimed to demonstrate discursive openness, to illustrate how the narrators constitute themselves through speaking, writing and other practices interwoven with power/knowledge relations. I paid attention to what happened in the stories, but also how these women felt about them, the emotions they experienced at a particular time and those elicited in the retelling (Pedwell & Whitehead, 2012). Emotions are important sources of embodied knowledge pointing to areas of information and possible future conversation and analysis (Fraser & MacDougall, 2017). Furthermore, silences, breaks, laughter, humour, pauses, uncertainties may represent the emergence of multivocality and counter-narratives (Chadwick, 2014; Fraser & MacDougall, 2017). There is no doubt that the narrator is the one who decides which stories she tells and how she tells them and, in the process, what she stresses or leaves out. However, within the latter models, it is not necessary to assume that the storyteller provided an objective or totally truthful account, but rather 'it is preferable to obtain a story that reflects the interpretations and the values of the storyteller' (Elliott, 2005). The validity of a life story depends on the research question

being addressed, which in my research, focuses on understanding these women's narratives. Rather than labelling a story true or untrue, I look for the reasons why the narrators tell their stories the way they do. here, I'd like to stress that the goal of narrative feminist research is not to find universally generalisable themes and understandings of experience but to offer insights, glimpses into other women's lives and ways of seeing the world. Among these narratives, patterns may surface which are relevant to others and may deserve further exploration (Mishler, 1986).

CONCLUSION

In presentation, the research procedures described in this chapter might appear ordered and well assembled, however, the reality has not been that neat. In looking back at the process of the thesis planning and procedure, I relate to what Hilary Byrne-Armstrong et al (2001) term 'critical moments.' The first critical moment was the topic of my research which, as mentioned in the preface of this thesis, started with an interest to study Islamist women activists. The second critical moment related to the conceptualisation of my methodology. The search for an approach that expresses the processes that reflected my personal and academic/activist principles and at the same time helps to answer my research questions took some time to realize. Third, the use of reflexivity sometimes left me confused. In trying to find a balance, I became attentive to the tension between the 'subjectivity of self-disclosure and the theoretical authenticity of good research' (Samani, 2010, p. 65). However, that reflexive process revealed its value in interpretation, which, according to Kim Etherington (2004), is a validation by the audience through understanding the position the researcher adopts in relation to the study.

My passage in coming to this enquiry, which started as a self-narrative in the preface, is an integral part of the mapping of this thesis. The elements of investigation were drawn from my own life experiences that presented and sustained my passion and interest in providing a counter-narrative to predominant narratives about 'Muslim women.' Revealing my own narrative helped illuminate the broader social and cultural assumptions and

processes that helped this research make meaning out of them and uncover how they play a role in the lives of these Muslim women activists through their narratives. Thus, narrative analysis has offered a way to understand the role personal stories play in the making of socio-political worlds (Fraser, 2004). In light of the post-positivist turn in the social sciences and while the positivist paradigm has focused on the objectivity, validity and generalisability of social research, others, like feminists, constructionists, postmodernists and others have sought to make a fundamental break from this setting and develop other approaches that assure the quality and trustworthiness of their research (Finlay, 2006). In reference to John Creswell and Dana Miller's (2000) measures for establishing validity, I hope I have provided a description that is sufficiently 'thick' as to give the reader a feel for the settings in which this data was collected and that my commitment to reflexive practice has made transparent my positionality. The thesis now turns to an exploration of the issues raised by the empirical data and to the development of an understanding of the complexities of the activism of Muslim women battling Fundamentalism in Britain and France.

IV. INTRODUCING *INSPIRE* & *BRIGADE DE MÈRES:* THE CONTEXT

This chapter draws on the interviews, along with the documentary material collected in this project; websites of both organizations, the two books written by Sara Khan and Nadia Remadna and social media accounts and articles published by and about both organizations to explore their goals and priorities and consider the forms of action into which these goals and priorities translated. I focus on *Inspire* and *Brigade de Merès* as they were both controversial within their social and political contexts at the time when the threats of ISIS attacks were at its height, from 2014 to 2016. Correspondingly, these two organizations brought together the women whose stories are recounted in this thesis. Sara Khan and Henna Rai worked together in a few of the projects implemented by *Inspire*, long before Henna created WARN in 2018. Similarly, what linked Nadia, Serenade and Aziza was the work they accomplished together through *Brigade de Merès*. The chapter begins with the contexts through which these organizations thrived. It provides insights into the emergence of ISIS and the rationale for State interventions against the group. This is followed by a brief exploration of publicly renowned women who have also been battling fundamentalism and ways in which these women were critiqued. The second part of the chapter provides accounts of the emergence of *Inspire* in Britain and the goals and priorities Sara and her colleagues had in mind when launching it. It then identifies the organization's most notable projects and describes the circumstances that led to the end of its formal days and its closure in November 2017. It then turns its focus on the foundation of *Brigade de Mères* in France and the motives and goals behind its establishment. It pinpoints the axes that it focuses on and identifies its major activities. This section closes by exploring the position on which the organization stands at present and its future aspirations, if any. The aim of this chapter is descriptive. To access the ambiguous of the activism of the women whose stories are recounted in this thesis, understand and unpack their narratives, we need to contextualize them within the setting of their organizations, the work they do and the circumstances under which this work was accomplished. As such, this outline allows for a clearer

exploration of their narrative and an understanding of the ways these narratives 'speak back' to the previously reviewed literature.

ENGENDERING THE 'WAR ON TERROR' IN THE AGE OF ISIS

It has now become a widely accepted knowledge that the 'War on Terror' swarms with gendered narratives (Cooke, 2001; Zine, 2006; Abu-Lughod, 2013; Massoumi, 2015)[19]. From 2001 when the Bush administration launched the 'War on Terror,' the claim was that 'the fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women' (Massoumi, 2015, p. 716). In Britain, the government provided unconditional support to the US initiatives of the 'War on Terror' (Joly & Wadia, 2017), justifying their support using civilizational narratives about 'saving Muslim women' from the oppression of patriarchal Muslim societies. Hard measures—which refer to de-radicalization policies—included increased police stop-and-search of those profiled as Muslims; heavy-handed policing at international borders; pre-charge and pre-train detentions; and surveillance and covert intelligent gathering (Khan & McMahon, 2016, p. 250). This has proven to be contentious, with critics purporting it to have been exploited to pursue long-standing policies, that reduce civil liberties and overstep human rights (Huckerby & Satterthwaite, 2013). Soft measures emerging after the London Bombings[20] with the July 2006 counterterrorist strategy document (Richards, 2011)—which broadly targets counter-radicalization efforts that address 'at-risk communities'—placed a firm emphasis on tackling 'disadvantage' and 'inequalities,' and improving the educational performance, employment opportunities, housing conditions and barriers to community cohesion within the Muslim community[21].

19 This is explained in detail in the literature review (Chapter II of this thesis).

20. On July 7, 2005, three near-simultaneous explosions tore apart the London Underground. Within an hour, the entire subway network was evacuated and a fourth explosion in a bus underscored that this was a terrorist operation. The bombings shattered the British counterterrorism services' assumptions about the global Islamist threat to Britain.

21. See https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/countering-international-terrorism-the-united-kingdoms-strategy p.12.

These measures have also given rise to much criticism and have been accused of dividing communities and failing to address deprivation and marginalisation (Abbas & Awan, 2015).

In France and in sharp contrast to the United States, the government insisted on a French model of assimilation rooted in the idea of integration through the adoption of French beliefs, values and behaviours (Lassalle, 2011). As part of the policy, the government has put large sums of money in selected disadvantaged areas to improve people's conditions, (ibid). The problem with this model, Olivier Roy (2007, p. 99) notes, is that it separates religion and culture and thus 'creates religion by making it a 'category apart,' reinforcing individual religious identities rather than allowing them to dissolve in more diversified practices.' Having realized its setbacks and in efforts to revise their model, from 2000 onwards, the French government became very much involved in the organization and institutionalization of Islam through collaboration with Muslims to help build a 'French Islam' with the dual objective of integrating the country's Muslim minority and fighting 'Islamist extremism' (Mas, 2006, p. 594). The goal has been to create an Islam that both conforms to the French model of secularism and is immune to radical interpretations, by implementing special training programs for Muslim preachers in French civic values—transforming Islam *in* France to an Islam *of* France. This initiative alienated many Muslims on all sides, resulting in a crisis of representation and legitimacy, as the organizations affiliated with the state—or otherwise—don't represent the diverse Muslim communities in France. This undermines the integration of Muslims into the broader society. At the same time, many Muslims consider a top-down approach to manage Islam as domesticating or patronizing, particularly in light of France's unresolved colonial legacy—a way to assimilate Islam 'to the point of invisibility' (ibid).

Under the guise of the latter policies, many prominent feminists have positioned themselves within the rhetoric of 'saving the Muslim woman' in their battle against religious fundamentalism. Amna Akbar and Rupal Oza (2013) locate them broadly within two domains. The first is the neo-Orientalist which has been thoroughly critiqued in chapter II. The second is the 'liberal' which they narrow down to two groups. The first includes women like Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who claims 'authentic' Muslim identity and has gained tremendous

popularity for denouncing 'militant Islam,' and calling for efforts to reform Islam and to police fellow Muslims (ibid, p. 152). They label this group as the 'good Muslim' (Mamdani, 2004) who positions herself as a liberal-modern standing against an illiberal and anti-modern one. The second draws on particular global human rights and secular frame, which includes women like Gita Sahgal[22], and Karima Bennoune[23], whom they label as 'secular Muslims' (Akbar & Oza, 2013). These women's history of engagement with women's human rights and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and their commitments to 'secular' politics, distinguishes them from the 'good Muslim' position which is supported and celebrated by the state. Their work, which at times criticized state policies, carried several objectives:

> highlighting the resurgence of fundamentalism in all religions and lobbying for a secular state; demanding women's rights over their own bodies and control over their own lives; opposing institutionalized Christian privilege; and resisting ethnic minority parity demands for religious accommodation, such as demands to extend rather than abolish the blasphemy law (and later legislation on incitement to religious hatred) and to extend rather than abolish state-funded religious schools (Dhaliwal & Yuval-Davis, 2014).

The difference between these women and the ones labelled 'good Muslims' is that they do not mobilize a gendered-victimized 'insider' status to provide credible access into the 'unfathomable world of the Muslim psyche,' they do not articulate the violence targeted at Islam as legitimate and necessary, and they do not associate all that is liberal and just with the 'West' (Akbar & Oza, 2013, p. 166). In this sense, the work of women like Gita Sahgal, Karima Bennoune and other Muslim women activists whose activism emerged amid the *Satanic Verses* Controversy that put the issue of fundamentalism at the centre of Western

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22. An Indian born writer, journalist and activist on issues of feminism, fundamentalism, racism. She has been heading Amnesty International's gender unit and has opposed the oppression of women in particular by religious fundamentalists. In 2010 she was suspended by Amnesty after criticizing them for their high-profile associations with Moazzam beg whom she called 'the most famous supporter of Taliban.'
23. A professor of international law at the University of California–Davis School of Law, author and since 2015 UN Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights. She grew up in Algeria and the United States and graduated from a joint program in law and Middle Eastern and North African studies at the University of Michigan. Her best-known book is Your Fatwa Does Not Apply Here. She has critiqued the Centre for Constitutional Rights' (CCR) and the American Civil Liberties Union's (ACLU) legal challenge to the US government's authorization for the targeted killing of US citizen Anwar Al-Aulaqi.

politics, was not supported by their respective states the way works of women like Ayaan Hirsi Ali's was. The discursive linking of women's empowerment to anti-terrorism and the downplaying of the significance of other, nonreligious dimensions of identity has trafficked secular feminist discourses in the 'good Muslim/bad Muslim' dichotomy, which relies on deeply essentialist constructions of culture and people and endorses the dangerous us/them dichotomy of the 'War on Terror.' The major obstacles that were facing these women are that, unlike Ayaan Hirsi Ali for example, they are battling both religious fundamentalism and the rise of the extreme right which has put them in a precarious position from both directions: the state and the Islamists. Marieme Hélie-Lucas states:

> It follows suit that when we speak against the growing rise of Muslim fundamentalism, we are accused of being sold out to governments, labelled racist, or 'Islamophobic,' as if one could not struggle at the same time against both the traditional extreme right and the new fundamentalist extreme right (Hélie-Lucas, 2011, p. 2).

The emergence of ISIS and its break with al-Qaeda's 'general command' in February 2014 and its claim of the establishment of the 'Islamic State' has introduced a threat of unprecedented magnitude within the international community. Islamic State or 'caliphate' is the political-religious state comprising the Muslim community, the lands and the people under its domination in the centuries following the death of the Prophet Muhammed. In the 20th century, the idea of the re-establishment of the caliphate was invoked by groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt as a symbol of global Islamic unity. Intrinsically, outside of extremist circles, the group's claim was widely rejected[24]. With territorial control, huge resources, savviness in exploiting modern communication technology, ISIS has presented a new version of extremism and terrorism to the world (Gunaratna, 2016). 'For every shocking and tragic beheading of a journalist and aid worker by ISIS that makes headlines, there are countless unreported others beheaded, crucified, flogged, segregated and "disappeared" via the veil…' Maryam Namazie, a British-Iranian secularist, political and human rights activist and blogger, tells Karima Bennoune in an interview for *Open*

24. See https://www.britannica.com/place/Caliphate/The-Abbasid-caliphate.

Democracy[25]. The public acknowledgement of the war crimes of ISIS, says Marieme Hélie-Lucas, a secular feminist from Iran and Algeria, 'creates a favourable climate for more openly demanding secular states as a protection from these extreme-right political forces'[26]. 'We have a better chance now to be heard by progressive forces than in the past,' she continues.

But in response to the rise of ISIS, far-right organizations across Europe have enjoyed increasing popularity and electoral support, 'and no longer represent fringe movements' (Easat-Daas & Ounissi, 2013). Far-right politics, also referred to as the 'extreme right' are politics on the right of the left-right spectrum than the standard political right, particularly in terms of extreme nationalism, conservative and authoritarian tendencies. With the rise of ISIS, the anti-Muslim narrative has come to be recognized as a central feature of the far-right discourse in Europe (Easat-Daas & Ounissi, 2013). As mentioned in chapter II, while the far-right is not the only source of the anti-Muslim narrative, it is increasingly linked to the normalization of the discourse, seeing themselves as defenders of European society and culture. As such, these groups would support figures like Ayaan Hirsi Ali for her unconditional backing of their politics, demanding a western-led war on Islam. She was cited, for example, as a source of inspiration in the 1,500-page manifesto of Anders Breivik, the right-wing shooter who killed 77 people and injured 319 in Norway. She even later sympathized with his argument that he 'had no other choice but to use violence'[27].

The works of Sara Khan, Nadia Remadna and their acquaintances emerged amid the rise of ISIS in 2014. In Britain, young girls are leaving the country to become 'jihadi brides.' In France, 'religious radicalization' is affecting more youth of immigrant origins in the suburbs more than it ever did since the late 1980s. And even though their ideologies, in the general sense, resemble those of the 'secular' Muslim women discussed above, they are celebrated by their respective states bearing similarity to those labelled 'good Muslims,' like Ayaan Hirsi Ali. Albeit, unlike Ayaan Hirsi Ali, they are being attacked by those from

25. See https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/promoting-global-secular-alternative-in-isis-era/
26. See https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/promoting-global-secular-alternative-in-isis-era/
27. https://www.vox.com/2016/3/1/11139272/muslim-pseudo-experts

the far-right. With the concept of 'identity politics' becoming ever more prevalent and powerful since it was coined in the late twentieth century (Noury & Roland, 2020), further confusion is added in regards to ways in which the works of women like Sara Khan, Nadia Remadna and their colleagues can be classified and critiqued. Increased economic polarization has been a short-run consequence of the recent financial crisis and a long-term consequence of manufacturing jobs being swept away by globalization (Besley & Persson, 2019). And heightened concerns about the loss of social status have gradually emerged among traditionally dominant groups, who feel threatened by immigration and gender equality (ibid). The election of Donald J. Trump in the US, the Brexit vote in the UK and the increasing support for radical-right populist parties and politicians in many countries across the world are all commonly attributed to such shocks and trends. So far, academics, feminists and researchers have not yet explored the works of these women. In the following section, I bring together data from my interviews with these women, numerous newspaper articles and reports in efforts to provide an overview of what it is that these women want? How do they translate their goals and priorities into action? And what actions do they engage in?

INSPIRE: 'INSPIRING WOMEN, STRENGTHENING SOCIETY'[28]

Inspire was an independent non-governmental advocacy organization (NGO) working to counter religious fundamentalism and pursue gender equality and women's rights. It was founded in 2009 by Sara Khan and Tehmina Saleem, who were both active within various Muslim organizations in Britain[29]. The organization aimed to 'create positive social change resulting in a more democratic, peaceful and fairer Britain'[30]. Its vision emphasised that women are key to the development and prosperity of any society and that Muslim women, like all women, are 'capable of being at the forefront of strengthening communities' and

28. See https://wewillinspire.com/about-us/
29. To note, I have not met Tehmina Saleem in this project as she was in maternity leave during the fieldwork and was not ready to take part in my project.
30. See https://wewillinspire.com/about-us/

tackling various problems both within Britain as well as internationally[31]. For the first few years, *Inspire* focused on Muslim women, campaigning against forced marriage, honour killing and female genital mutilation and educating them about their legal rights[32]. Until 2011, organizing workshops and training sessions around Britain, based on consultancy fees, was the organization's mainstream work.

From 2011 onwards, *Inspire's* work began to attract media attention, as they started to openly condemn Islamic fundamentalism. Among *Inspire's* most notable projects was the 2011 conference *Speaking in God's name: Re-examining Gender in Islam*, which was the organization's first public event. The conference was described by some Muslim women activists as a great momentum for *Inspire*[33]. Until 2014, the focus of the organization was on calling for the rights of Muslim women. The sudden rise of ISIS in 2013 shifted *Inspire's* aims to challenging religious fundamentalism, which, for them, is in direct relation to the denigration of women's rights. In 2014, *Inspire* launched its anti-ISIS campaign *Making a Stand.* The campaign, funded by the British government, was one of *Inspire's* most successful and recognized, in terms of media coverage and impact. However, the organization's engagement with the UK government caused Sara much backlash from Muslim communities, which resulted in the organization's loss of support from the grassroots. Sara and *Inspire* reached the height of their public recognition from 2014 until 2016, attracting significant media attention, but also facing a considerable backlash. In 2016, Sara co-authored the book *The Battle for British Islam: Reclaiming Muslim Identity from Extremism* with Tony McMahon. And in November 2017, she was appointed as Chief of the Commission for Countering Extremism, an appointment that brought her further backlash. In 2018, a year after Sara's appointment, *Inspire* closed its doors and suspended its website, Twitter and Facebook accounts, without any announcements concerning the reasons. That was the end of *Inspire's* formal days of activism.

31. See https://wewillinspire.com/about-us/
32. See https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/im-taking-on-the-islamists-but-wheres-your-backbone-dsnbf0zqq
33. See https://www.patheos.com/blogs/mmw/2011/06/a-conversation-on-the-speaking-in-gods-name-conference-part-i/

The Early Days: A Gendered Perspective

> We did what female activists are so good at doing. Instead of waiting for men to take the lead, we rolled up our sleeves and did something about it ourselves. We set up *Inspire*. With no money. No resources. No manpower. No office. What we did have was an idea and something that even money can't buy: commitment, a sense of burning injustice, thankless activism and the right to represent ourselves, our views and our voices, loudly and publicly (Sara Khan).

This quote was a part of Sara's final words as the director of *Inspire* in February 2017, almost a decade after *Inspire* came to being. Published as a blog post on *Inspire's* website, Sara identified herself as a 'female' activist, not just an activist, voicing what many feminists articulate. Even though she did not necessarily identify as 'feminist,' as revealed in this quote, Sara's gendered perspective was born long before she created *Inspire*. In the bio section of *Inspire's* website, she described herself as a 'born human rights activist,' who has campaigned for women's rights within British Muslim communities for over 20 years. In the latter quote, she stressed a sense of 'burning injustice,' a 'commitment' and 'the right to represent ourselves.' This could be understood in what Sara Ahmed (2017) conceptualizes as 'wilfulness' which describes the 'feminist spirit': an attribute of a woman who does not give up; does not recede and always opposes.

Between 2006 and 2007, shortly after the London bombings, Sara recounted, in one of our interviews, that a small group of Muslim women activists who were 'sick and tired' of no one doing anything about gender equality and extremism, began to discuss the possibility of 'setting up something.' Being 'sick and tired' is a trope used by many feminists for a long time to describe the constant struggles they face which prompt them to action (Smith, 1995). In her blog post, Sara stressed that *Inspire* was created out of 'a sense of sheer frustration,' and that by recognizing the 'reality of gender inequality in all aspects of Muslim society,' this group of women 'shared resentment with the lack of work being done' by many of the larger and more 'representative' Muslim organizations. In our interview, she emphasised that this group of women activists tried to implement positive change while

they were working with Muslim organizations like the *Muslim Council of Britain,* its affiliated bodies, like *the Islamic Society of Britain and* its youth wing *Young Muslims UK,* but failed. They 'knew just how bad the problem was.' In her quote, Sara painted a picture of this group of women forming a space that generated and transformed their emotions of being 'sick and tired.' It is in this sense that *Inspire* as a space enabled the identification and creation of shared feelings and mutual attachments vital to the sustainability of the activism of this group of women (Reger, 2004).

In these early days, Sara told me, 'it was a great insight to see and experience first-hand the control that many Muslim women were facing by Muslim men,' despite living in a country, that has 'some of the best equality legislation in the world.' Putting much weight on the importance of having first-hand experience, a sense of awareness of existing injustices, is an important factor in the formation and maintenance of activist commitment (Downton & Wehr, 1997). This group of Muslim women were herself, Tehmina Saleem, who co-founded *Inspire* with her and a few friends working with other Muslim organization, one of which was Henna Rai. As evident from the latter quote, gender issues constituted the main goal in establishing *Inspire*. Sara's turn to 'secular' activism, as will be mentioned in the following chapter, materialized through her questioning gender issues within Muslim societies in Britain. Her experiences of growing up in a Muslim society in Britain, followed by her experiences of activism with Muslim organizations enabled her and her colleagues to identify sources of injustice within these organizations, as well as within Muslim societies at large. In one of our interviews, Sara told me:

> You know, we have been doing work for decades, but we don't see any change or any improvement in gender inequality within Muslim communities. And the constant thing we always hear from community leaders is always "no no sister we have to address Islamophobia first ... once we address that, once we've solved that problem then we can solve the issue of gender inequality." So, I'm like ... no you can do both at the same time! ... because both are two sides of the same coin. Muslim women often experience both Islamophobia and gender discrimination, so that's it! You can challenge both!

The major driver behind these women's aspiration to establish *Inspire*, thus, was to better the lives of Muslim women at a time when no formal Muslim organization in Britain endeavoured to do so, as Sara claimed. Alongside this, in the shadow of the London bombings and the realization that 'a problem of Islamist extremism within British Muslim communities was growing,' she said, she and Tehmina Saleem, out of this group of women, decided to take things 'in their own hands,' and stop waiting for male-led organizations to initiate action. As fundamentalists[34] came to dominate the public sphere within Muslim communities in Britain, these women alongside a few others, saw a different power situation emerging that made them see the 'two' instead of 'one elephant in the room,' as Sara phrased it. And because Islamic fundamentalism has 'vested interest in perpetuating women's roles as upholders of community morals and traditions' (Dhaliwal, 2014), working against fundamentalists has also become a major objective to Sara and her colleagues. Gender issues and Islamic Fundamentalism as two interrelated problems became the founding premises of *Inspire* as an organization. Formally, it was Sara and Tehmina Saleem who founded Inspire, while their female colleagues continued to support the organization, albeit informally, Sara explained.

For the first few years, *Inspire* focused on Muslim women, 'some of the most marginalised people in this country,' Sara told *The Times*, campaigning against forced marriage, honour killing and female genital mutilation and educating them about their legal rights[35]. They organized training sessions for Muslim women on various issues. In some of their workshops, they focused on the rising religious fundamentalism among youth. In these sessions, they outlined how radicalization takes place, how can women safeguard their children and what should women's vital role in tackling extremism be, Sara recounted. Until 2011, organizing workshops and training sessions around Britain, based on consultancy fees, was the organization's main activities. From 2011 onwards, *Inspire's* work began to attract media attention, as they started to openly condemn Islamic fundamentalism. In the following section, I focus on *Inspire's* most notable projects; the

34. Islamic fundamentalist groups in the UK include: apolitical (Salafi); political: *Hizb ut Tahrir* (HT), *Muslim against Crusaders* (MAC), *al-Muhajiroon* and some other violence-oriented Al Qaeda type groups.
35. See https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/im-taking-on-the-islamists-but-wheres-your-backbone-dsnbf0zqq

ones that attracted significant media attention and brought *Inspire* to the forefront of controversy; applauded by some and condemned by others.

Inspire's **Most Notable Projects**

Inspire launched its website in 2010. Its earliest updates appeared in 2011 when Sara and Tehmina organized the conference *Speaking in God's Name: Re-examining Gender in Islam*, the organization's first public event. The title of the conference followed the title of the book written by its keynote speaker Khaled Abou El Fadl, a professor of Islamic law at UCLA. Drawing on both religious and secular sources, the conference, as well as the book argued that divinely ordained law is frequently misinterpreted by Muslim authorities at the expense of certain groups, including women. The main idea behind the conference was to examine gender issues in light of the Islamic feminist approach, defined by Margot Badran (2009) as a feminist discourse and practise articulated within an Islamic paradigm, born out of the combination of women's knowledge and their rereading of the *Qur'an* and other religious texts, to 'distinguish a brand of feminism' that seeks to reform–in women's favour–social practices and legal provisions that rule Muslim societies (Moghissi, 2011, p. 11). The conference invited an impressive number of renowned scholars like; Amina Wadud, an American professor of Islamic studies and a cornerstone of Islamic feminism; and Ziba Mir Hosseini, an Iranian born British anthropologist studying Islamic law. The conference, which was held in the City Hall in London, Sara described in her blog, 'was a monumental success.' It highlighted the necessity for genuine and critical debate and examination of the Qur'anic texts, which these scholars believe could be interpreted in favour of women's rights. The conference was described by some Muslim women activists as a great push for *Inspire,* however, it was also criticized for focusing on the academic aspect rather than reaching for the grassroots[36]. What the conference discussed, however, was not new. Muslim feminist scholars in the West who created transnational spaces for Muslim women around the world have been calling for the reinterpretation of Qur'anic texts since the 1980s,

36. See https://www.patheos.com/blogs/mmw/2011/06/a-conversation-on-the-speaking-in-gods-name-conference-part-i/

following the Islamic revolution in Iran, when the global rise of Islamic fundamentalism became alarming.

Toward the end of the conference, *Inspire* launched a campaign they named *Jihad Against Violence*, in 'a bid to reclaim the term from extremists,' *The Guardian* wrote[37]. The campaign which was, as Sara told me, signed by people from 32 countries, aimed to combat all forms of violence with an emphasis on terrorism, domestic abuse and female genital mutilation. She argued that because some have attempted to justify these forms of violence in the name of Islam, the idea was to reclaim the term *Jihad,* an Arabic word that means to labour, struggle or exert effort, to indicate the seriousness with which the issue of violence against women needed to be taken. The term, however, is highly contested, as it is used by some Islamists to signify a holy war to defend Islam[38]. In an interview with *The Guardian,* Sara said; 'people think "*jihad* against violence" is a contradictory statement, but our *jihad* is for peace … we couldn't sit back and stay silent while our religion is being used to carry out acts of violence.' The campaign was criticized by Muslim women activists and scholars, as somehow 'forced.' Some others saw that it may backfire, because particularly since 9/11, the use of the term *jihad* has entered the space of international political and media discourse. While media has done some damage to the understanding of the *jihad*, the term has been used and abused by the ones who have resorted to the use of violence in its name. The term was originally used to refer to one's personal struggle against one's own mortal failings and weaknesses, which would include battling against one's pride, fears, anxieties and prejudices. *Jihad* has now been taken–by Muslims and non-Muslims alike–to refer to an aggressive attitude that is rooted in a reactionary discourse of authenticity and purity, giving it a militant edge that it did not possess (Noor, 2011). Sara's response to the criticism received for using the term is that *Inspire* wanted to emphasise the responsibility on Muslim leaders to reject the justification of violence, 'whether it's female genital mutilation, whether it's honour killing or honour crimes,' in the name of *jihad*[39]. In response, however, the writer Basma Al-Mutlaq suggested using the concept of 'gender *jihad*' coined by Amina Wadud,

37. See https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2011/jun/06/muslim-womens-group-jihad-violence
38. For details of the different meanings of the word in the Arabic language and Muslim traditions, see glossary.
39. See https://www.newageislam.com/interview/uk-muslim-women-launch-jihad-against-violence/d/4809.

which she believes would have been more relevant to the core discussion of the conference[40], as opposed to '*jihad* against violence.'

Until 2012, *Inspire's* essential goal was to raise awareness among Muslim women, using the Islamic feminist arguments that there is nothing in Islam's theology that constrains women from a place in the public sphere. The work of the organization, therefore, focused on campaigning against patriarchal practices such as female genital mutilation, honour killings, forced marriage and so on. The sudden emergence of ISIS with its seductive social media propaganda, its successful grooming of young adults to join them shifted *Inspire's* objective to challenging religious fundamentalism. The organization did work on countering the narrative of Islamists earlier, but not as openly as they did from 2013. 'The impact of these ideologies on women's rights is glaring,' Sara told me. 'A lot of our work is quite reactive because you get something that blows up in the media and we have to respond to it,' she explained. Sara's words, thus, imply that the rise of ISIS became the 'opportunity' that *Inspire* has used to cultivate further action (Downton & Wehr, 1997). Since 2014, 'things went off the scale,' Sara said. *Inspire* launched an anti-ISIS campaign named *Making a Stand.* The campaign which was the first that was funded by the British government, as Sara claimed, was one of *Inspire's* most successful and recognized, in terms of media coverage, geographical coverage and impact on society. As stated in *Inspire's* website, the campaign aimed to encourage Muslim women to unite as one voice against ISIS. Theresa May, who was the Home Secretary at that time, spoke at the campaign asserting that the role women can play in combating the extremist threat here and abroad is unique and powerful, concluding with the following words:

> I am honoured to support a campaign which asks Muslim women to make a stand and help to build stable and peaceful communities[41].

The launch of *Making a Stand* came in the wake of widespread reporting of atrocities committed by ISIS. Inspired by their earlier campaign *Jihad Against Violence,* the campaign

40. See https://www.patheos.com/blogs/mmw/2011/06/a-conversation-on-the-speaking-in-gods-name-conference-part-ii/
41. See https://www.gov.uk/government/news/home-secretary-supports-makingastand-campaign

visited hundreds of Muslim women in nine cities across the UK, taught mothers theological counter-narratives to extremist ideologies and ways by which they can safeguard their children against radicalization. The campaign was delivered, Sara said, because of the high demand; 'these same women did not feel that male-led "representative" Muslim organizations or mosques were providing them with such support,' once more asserting the uniqueness of *Inspire's* work. *The Sun* promoted it with a cover featuring a Muslim woman veiled in a British Flag and seven inside pages. Tehmina Kazi, a firm supporter of Sara's work and one of the women interviewed in this thesis, praised the campaign for 'uniting Muslims,' asserting that Initiatives like #makingastand 'provide a refreshing change from those that have dominated the British political scene for years,' referring to the efforts of Muslim community leaders who, 'take us backwards and propagate the cycle of hate.' Nevertheless, the campaign became the source of the major backlash levelled against Sara and her work. The fact that it was celebrated, supported and funded by the very policies that were criticized by Muslim communities put many question marks on Sara's work at the time[42].

In February 2015, British newspapers reported at least 60 young women believed to have fled the country to join ISIS, many of them were teenagers who were radicalized online. Among them were Shamima Begum, Kadiza Sultana and Amira Abase, three girls from the Bethnal Green Academy in East London. Following these events, *Inspire* published a letter written by Sara[43] urging young girls not to give attention to the propaganda disseminated by ISIS and its supporters, who target women using social media and online forums. The letter, published on *Inspire's* website and emailed to school teachers around London, was reported in The *Independent, Metro* and *Huffington Post*. It was perceived by the British media as 'powerful' and 'heartfelt'[44]. After writing that letter, Sara 'has been besieged by media

42. See for example https://5pillarsuk.com/2016/06/16/anti-extremism-campaign-by-sara-khans-inspire-covertly-produced-by-home-office/
43. See https://musliminstitute.org/freethinking/islam/letter-young-muslim-girls-if-you-are-considering-leaving-uk-join-isis
44. See https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/muslim-womens-rights-campaigner-writes-heartfelt-letter-to-girls-thinking-of-joining-isis-10069825.html

requests–making appearances on *Panorama* and *Sky News*,' Suzie Mackenzie writes for Vogue Britain[45]. The following are excerpts of the letter:

> Dear Sister,
>
> You won't know me but like you I too am British and Muslim. Some of your friends may have gone out to join ISIS and you are also considering going out too ... I have no other intention in writing this letter but to tell you that you are being lied to in the wickedest of ways ... You are being lied to first and foremost about your religious duty as a Muslim but also about the reality of life under ISIS ... do not destroy your life and your families lives by buying into a lie. You will find many of your fellow Muslim sisters have also rejected the call of ISIS as they have seen through the poisonous ideology it peddles. Feel free to contact me directly if you would like to talk more[46].

Central to Sara's argument was the idea that ISIS and its 'self-appointed Caliph Baghdadi' had misrepresented a multitude of essential Islamic doctrines, from the necessity of *hijra* (migration) to the Islamic State to the concept of the Caliphate itself. As reported by *The Guardian*, the letter was viewed 40,000 times within a day of going online and reprinted in newspapers across the world[47]. The letter addressed British Muslims in a voice that marked her out as one of them, spoke of shared experiences and of respect. With that letter, she has been particularly successful in reaching young Muslim women. In the letter, Sara identified herself as a woman first then as a Muslim. In her argument, young women are being manipulated by men who are using their faith to take them away from their families and communities into 'danger.'

From 2013, Inspire has been involved in campaigns against gender segregation in schools and in universities, beginning with the campaign against the *Universities UK*[48]

45. See https://www.vogue.co.uk/article/sara-khan-we-will-inspire-muslim-group
46. See https://musliminstitute.org/freethinking/islam/letter-young-muslim-girls-if-you-are-considering-leaving-uk-join-isis
47. See https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/28/sara-khan-stop-these-muslim-girls-making-worst-mistake-of-their-lives-isis
48. Universities UK is the collective voice of 137 universities in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Their core purpose is to maximize the positive impact for students and the public both in the UK and globally through teaching, research and scholarship. See universitiesuk.ac.uk

controversial guidelines in 2013, which allowed the voluntary separation of men and women at events based on teachings of Islam. The rationale behind the guidelines, that were withdrawn after sweeping campaigns, was that 'there does not appear to be any discrimination on gender grounds merely by imposing segregated seating'[49]. 'They just assume that all Muslims want gender segregation,' Sara told me in astonishment. From 2013, *Inspire* was also involved in campaigning against gender segregation in Islamic schools. In October 2017, the Court of Appeal ruled that gender segregation in co-ed schools is unlawful sex discrimination and is a violation of the Equality Act 2010. The ruling overturned a previous verdict which suggested that 'separate is equal' and that neither boys or girls were being discriminated against. *Inspire* and *Southall Black Sisters* acted as interveners in that case alongside the Equality Human Rights Commission and the Department for Education. Sara's argument was that 'the right to equality for women and girls of Muslim background in this instance is being seriously undermined'[50]. Alarmed by the 'growing acceptance' of such a practice in universities and schools, 'in a context where all the evidence shows that minority women are subject to growing abuse, isolation, inequality and powerlessness,' Sara viewed it as a step backwards informed by the Muslim fundamentalist view that 'women are inferior and the cause of disorder and sexual chaos in society'[51]. This campaign was held during the time I was conducting my fieldwork. I have attended several protests where I have seen Sara, Pragna Patel, a founding member of the Southall Black Sisters (SBS) and Women Against Fundamentalism (WAF) and Mariam Namazie at the forefront of the demonstrations. After this campaign, *Inspire* went quiet. At the time, I was not sure whether it was the lack of demand, with the fall in numbers of young British Muslims fleeing to ISIS and the fall of ISIS territories one after the other. Little did I know at the time that this campaign was the end of Inspire's formal days.

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49. See https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-life/10510284/Gender-apartheid-segregation-is-real-in-UK-universites.-So-why-arent-more-people-fighting-it.html
50. See http://sarakhan.co.uk/blog/2017/10/gender-segregation-facts-al-hijrah-judgement/
51. See https://maryamnamazie.com/court-of-appeal-gender-segregation-is-sex-discrimination/

The End of *Inspire's* Formal Days

At the end of 2017, Sara was running *Inspire* on her own. 'It is a quiet time for the organization' she told me. It is a time of reflection, a time of 're-structuring the organization, turning it into a charity, getting the trustees in and fundraising.' Her plans for the summer holidays as she put it was to 'fundraise like mad.' Her aim, she said, was to bring in about five new members of staff in addition to *Inspire's* only full-time employee; Yasmine Weaver. In her words, she said:

> When you see what's happening, means I need to step back and focus on the internals. I can't keep delivering constantly outputs cause then how much time I've got to focus on the organization. And that is where we kind of got beat cause there was so much demand that we couldn't focus on the important things to keep the organization running and that is where I am at now …There are so many ideas and so many projects that I wanna do. Challenge the Fundamentals! I really wanna come up like they've never experienced before … What I want to do is expand that pool of funding and bring a lot more money that will fund an office, fund more members of staff full-time that will run projects.

In this quote, Sara implied a sense of burnout resulting from constant work and constant challenges, which led to her decision to take a step back and focus on building the organization. One project that Sara wished to implement was to run an annual leadership program for upcoming young Muslim girls to empower them to become the next generation of leaders, 'then I can retire and … take it easy,' she said. Having said that shows a desire to pass a 'legacy' to the future generations, whom she believed will be 'fearless compared to today's generation of women,' who will be able to say 'screw you men, we're gonna say what we want to say, we're gonna fight.' She also regretted having started late, believing that had she started younger, particularly before she got married, she may have been more able to better build the organization.

During this last interview, Sara provided me with what appeared to be solid plans for her organization, yet later, I realized that she omitted to tell me what I perceive as 'important' information; her appointment by the home office as head of the UK's newly

formed Commission for Countering Extremism, which I learned later from the news. It could be that, at the time of our last interview, she had not yet received the appointment. As she said, most of her work was a reaction to the way events unfold and so her plans were constantly changing. Or, it could be that she had known already but did not want to say, because the appointment was not firmed up or that she was not yet ready to share such news. She could have also been ashamed of the fact that she knew she will not be able to keep her organization running, something that may disappoint the ones who stood by her. Nevertheless, Sara presented to me a very confident narrative about what the future held. Francesca Polletta (2006, p. 40) argues that, by means of their narrative, activists seek to 'compel their audiences to sympathize and occasionally to act.' They tell stories differently in different situations, what Polletta terms 'narrative performance.' (p. 41). As such, these narratives require us to work to resolve the ambiguities as events unfold and to anticipate the conclusion with which the story ends (ibid, p. 10). When I heard the news, I tried to contact Sara with no success. For a year, I continued following up on *Inspire's* social media accounts which had no new posts. In December 2018, I found that *Inspire's* Facebook and Twitter accounts were non-existent. Later, in the early months of 2019, Inspire's website reappeared with a note stating that: 'This is an archive of the Inspire Women CIC website. The CIC no longer exists but the Inspire website as seen here provides a historical account of the ground-breaking work delivered by Inspire from 2008 to 2018.' Sara Khan's website, however, still exists.

Brigade Des Mères: 'Debout Les Mères … Reveillez Vous'[52]

Brigade de Mères is a French grassroots organization launched in 2014 to provide support for traumatised mothers of foreign fighters working to save children from recruitment in extremist and jihadist groups. Unlike *Inspire* that started earlier, with a clear gendered perspective, *Brigade de Mères* was founded in particular as a reaction to the jihadist group Islamic State surge on to the international scene. In 2012, a 23-year-old gunman called

52. The Slogan of the organization, which means 'Stand Up Mothers, Wake Up!'

Mohamed Merah killed three soldiers, three children and a teacher at a Jewish school[53]. That was the first attack known to be committed by Islamists in France. In May 2013, a French soldier was stabbed in the neck by a convert to Islam[54]. Shortly after this attack, Nadia Remadna, a social worker and community activist in one of Paris's disadvantaged suburbs named *Sevran*, who was later labelled as the 'amazon of the lost territories,'[55] announced the creation of *Brigade de Mères* with the purpose of preventing the radicalization of young people in the suburbs, 'by trying to put the values of the Republic back in the neighbourhoods'[56]. The organization's main aim was to save teenagers who have been expelled from school, which made them easy prey for delinquency and Islamic recruiters. In-person support, networking, intellectual tools, philosophy, debating classes and self-esteem training are *Brigade de Mères*'s means of supporting teenagers 'standing closest to the border between kids and terrorism'[57]. Unlike *Inspire's* top-down approach, *Brigade des Mères* got involved with families on a very personal level. Unlike *Inspire*, Nadia and her organization were not supported or funded by the state. In fact, in Nadia's words, the state's blindness on the problem of radicalism in France was hampering their efforts, hers and the women working with her. For that, she believed that change would come from the grassroots.

Like *Inspire,* the organization reached the height of its media recognition from 2014 until 2016 when ISIS recruitment became a major threat to Western governments and citizens alike. In 2015, Nadia and her fellow mothers were honoured in a ceremony at the Élysée Palace by President François Hollande. Since that event, Nadia became the go-to mother in a brigade that was supported by more than 1000 mothers. She also became a prominent media figure who spoke as an expert of the problems of radicalism in the suburbs. Yet, in terms of workforce, like *Inspire*, it was solely because of Nadia that the

53. See https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-33288542
54. See https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-33288542
55. See http://www.lepoint.fr/societe/nadia-remadna-l-amazone-des-territoires-perdus-13-03-2016-2025024_23.php#xtor=CS2-238 and https://womenintheworld.com/2016/09/21/meet-the-founder-of-the-french-jihad-busting-mothers-brigade/
56. As she told me in one of my interviews with her.
57. See http://nytlive.nytimes.com/womenintheworld/2016/09/21/meet-the-founder-of-the-french-jihad-busting-mothers-brigade/

organization existed. In 2018, the organization launched a project named *Vigiparents* that was, in theory, supported by the state, with the objectives of proposing helpful tools in coherence with the 2018's government's plan of action against the radicalization of youth[58]. It is yet to see whether the organization will succeed in implementing it.

The Beginnings: 'To be Free'

> In Sevran, I know each and every one personally … I find myself making phone-calls to search for a teenage girl who escaped her family, to find that she was indoctrinated by her boyfriend … I get called upon to find a lawyer for a child who–because of a bad encounter–found himself in the immediate presence of radicals … I get called upon by a woman who got beaten by her husband and has nowhere to sleep; "I'm a friend of Najat … she said that you can help me" … These are only a few examples of how close I know my community more than who call themselves experts … When you see stuff like that, you wonder! … So, one evening while watching television, I thought I'm already doing it, why not create a brigade, like the anti-crime brigade, or the narcotics brigade!

In her book, Nadia narrated, in detail, stories of women and youth from *Sevran*, explaining how she supported them for many years. She also narrated her profound knowledge of the structural problems of the *banlieues*; the deteriorating gender and generational relations there; the failure of schools to deliver quality education; delinquency; and recently, the problem of radicalization (Remadna & Bernard, 2016). 'I started *Brigade des Mères* in 2014 because I saw everything! It was worrying to see my neighbourhood turning Islamist just like in … Algeria, Tunisia, Syria and Iraq!' Nadia swiftly responded to my question about how the idea of *Brigade des Mères* came to being. A few years before she established the organization, she worked as a family and education consultant in the council of *Seine-Saint-Denis*. During these years, she was able to gain an insider's assessment of the realities of the problems in the *banlieues*, she said. And even though women like Fadela Amara, former president of the association *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* (Neither Whores nor Submissives), was the first to denounce the influence of male control over the life of inner cities and violence

58. See http://premium.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/2018/04/08/01016-20180408ARTFIG00137-impliquer-les-familles-pour-prevenir-la-radicalization-islamiste.php

against women in the early 2000s, leading to government initiatives to develop the suburbs in 2008, (Amara, 2003), Nadia believed 'it is becoming worse today,' as religious radicalization of the youth is reaching its height.

'The suburban city is forbidden to us; it is reserved for men.' She contended that, in contrast to her own adolescence, constraints on young women of immigrant origin are no longer imposed only by fathers, but by brothers, husbands and any male relative or neighbour, extending their authority to all women in the *banlieues*, especially the younger. To her surprise, the rise of fundamentalism is now happening in France, which she always saw as 'the land of freedom!' She argued that poverty and the exclusion from French society, resulted in the feelings of rage that young men in the suburbs were experiencing, leading to their radicalization. The neighbourhood of *Sevran* is not like any typical Paris tourist attraction. The suburb has been called a 'French Molenbeek,' after the Brussels terrorist attacks in 2015[59]. The neighbourhood's streets, Nadia recounted, look like streets in a neighbourhood in Algeria in its worst Islamist times, with male-only cafes and restaurants, shop windows bursting with *niqabs* and Saudi-style flowing dresses. In a little over two years, 15 young people have left *Sevran* for the Islamic State's 'Caliphate' of Syria and Iraq. Six locals were already confirmed dead. This had left behind traumatised mothers, who were often accused, by the state as well as members of the community, of not attending to their children and allowing them to 'get away'[60]. Nadia told me 'I want to save these children from recruitment by getting women to stand up and wake up.'

Even though a gendered perspective was apparent, Nadia's activism was mainly directed towards the marginalised and unprivileged, both male and female. And even though she saw the problem of male's control over female's bodies, she believed that the fundamental problem leading to radicalization is in direct relation to structural problems of the suburbs; one of which is that some children were denied an education. She told me

59. See http://nytlive.nytimes.com/womenintheworld/2016/09/21/meet-the-founder-of-the-french-jihad-busting-mothers-brigade/
60. See http://nytlive.nytimes.com/womenintheworld/2016/09/21/meet-the-founder-of-the-french-jihad-busting-mothers-brigade/

that some schools refused children because they had learning difficulties and should be enrolled in specialized private schools. But parents in the *banlieues* could not afford private schools. As a result, those children were left no choice but to attend *madrasas* (Islamic Schools), the only option available to them. In the *madrasas*, Nadia continued, these young boys (and girls) end up growing a sense of 'belonging' to the 'radical' groups running these schools, who 'gave them a hand when nobody else did.' Nadia and the brigade of mothers who joined her have witnessed first-hand how Islamist networks in the suburbs 'who hate secular, liberal democracy' were attracting those young men and women. In an interview for *Women of the World* she said:

> These kids were taken in by religious associations using the cover of helping them with their homework, tutoring or learning Arabic, but in fact, they were Koranic schools … and who should be blamed? The "Salafists" or Sunni Wahhabists with their Saudi-derived ultra-strict neo-purist 7th-century interpretation of Islam, as well as the Muslim Brotherhood and umpteen "gurus" influencing vulnerable youth[61].

Having experienced childhood in a traditional Muslim family herself and having worked within these communities throughout her adult life, Nadia saw herself as an expert in understanding these conservative Islamist ideologies and approaches and therefore the most suitable to contribute to eradicating them; an authentic spokeswoman from the *banlieues*. Like Sara, she has put much weight on the significance of 'first-hand' experience in the success and urgency of her organization. For a few years, Nadia continued to provide one-to-one support and advice to mothers of radicalized youth. Her credibility as an experienced social worker in *Sevran* and her long years of living in the suburbs facilitated her becoming a 'go to' figure seeking help and advice from. Her main problem, she asserted, is that working in the public sector prevented her from publicly speaking out, hence the decision of founding her organization.

Nadia criticized the state for having 'abandoned' the suburbs and persistently turning a blind eye to the problems of the *banlieues*, especially that of radicalism. One of the

61. See https://womenintheworld.com/2016/09/21/meet-the-founder-of-the-french-jihad-busting-mothers-brigade/

brigade's members Veronique Roy whom I met later with Aziza Sayeh (introduced earlier), even accused Mayor Stephane Gatignon in an open letter of having closed his eyes to the presence of radical Islamic centres in *Sevran*. Her son Quentin, a convert to Islam, left in September 2014 'to wage jihad in Syria.' Later, she learned of his death. Quentin attended the so-called *Sevran* 'Daesh prayer hall' that was eventually closed down by the government. It was only after his departure that Veronique discovered that this association was run using public municipal funds[62]. Nadia asserted that the government's neglect was not only affecting the suburbs, but also the public sector, where Islamisation has become 'standard.' She told me in astonishment, 'now some of my co-workers would tell me not to drink coffee in public during the month of Ramadan and would advise me to wear the *hijab*.' Despite her criticism of the state policies, she continued to be a staunch supporter of French *Laïcité*, with an idealised view of the Republic. 'You no longer feel like you are in France. It is like you are in the Third World and we are the NGO saying we will the 'French culture' back to France in 2016,' she said. She asserted that living in *Sevran*, seeing, first-hand, how the neighbourhood was quickly becoming a 'school for indoctrinating youth' was the main driver for her decision of establishing an organization, within which, no one could silence her. In her words:

> I had to establish *Brigade des Mères* so I can speak freely and be able to help these children and mothers. Yes, I was still a social worker. Why did I establish an NGO then? So, I can be free. In my workplace, I was criticized for talking about the process of Islamization that is taking place in France. When I see very young girls being forced to wear a scarf; when I see very young children aged 4 and 5 being forced to pray in the mosque, I need to do something. I need to be able to talk about it without being silenced … I felt I had a voice only when I established *Brigades des Mères*.

Unlike *Inspire* founded in 2009 to better the life of Muslim women through countering Islamic fundamentalism, *Brigade des Mères* was founded by Nadia in 2013 for the paramount reason of eradicating ISIS recruitment of youth. A gendered perspective was not

62. See https://womenintheworld.com/2016/09/21/meet-the-founder-of-the-french-jihad-busting-mothers-brigade/

the major driver behind Nadia's activism like it was for Sara, but realized at a later stage. And even though, as a young woman who was raised in a 'traditional' family, her activism was first born out of a refusal of the patriarchal structures she was raised around (as will be discussed later), the emergence of ISIS has shifted her interests to new questions and new concerns. She told me 'before we mothers were afraid of our kids getting into juvenile delinquency, but now we are petrified they will become terrorists!' Thus, like I*nspire*, the rise of ISIS became the opportunity to *Brigade des Mères*. The focus on gender, however, came from her belief that educating mothers and exposing them to 'something other than the culture of their countries of origin'[63] could help prevent the development of radical ideologies. 'Cultivating critical thinking,' she said, can aid mothers in better detecting radicalization and preventing it from taking root. 'Mothers can be a lot more vigilant, by speaking a lot more to their kids and keeping controls on them,' Nadia told Emma-Kate Symons[64].

From the Periphery to the Centre

> Since 2014, *Brigade des Mères* has become like an emergency unit in a hospital! This is precisely who we are; an emergency intervention unit. Some come with fever, others come with a stomach ache and so on. This is *Brigade des Mères*; an organization that serves Muslims and Non-Muslims alike … Like any hospital that has people coming in and people going out, *Brigade des Mères* welcomes and helps everybody. People come in with a problem and many of them go out improved and recovered.

The latter quote was the first that Nadia told me about *Brigade de Mères* in our first interview. She portrayed it as an emergency unit that answers calls for help from everyone and anyone at any time in the *banlieues*; women, men, mothers, children, Muslims and non-Muslims. The organization's earliest activity was the delivery of in-person support. 'We help people with their children's problems, we attempt to find places for them in state schools, we

63. See https://womenintheworld.com/2016/09/21/meet-the-founder-of-the-french-jihad-busting-mothers-brigade/
64. See https://womenintheworld.com/2016/09/21/meet-the-founder-of-the-french-jihad-busting-mothers-brigade/

struggle to find jobs for the older ones … and we also stand by and support the mothers' she said. They assess children's lives in the suburbs by talking to their mothers to know who their friends are; what interests they have; how they are treated at home and so on. They also provide emotional and legal support to women experiencing domestic abuse. For Nadia, working closely with the grassroots is the organization's major strength. In her words, 'what we have that no one else has is the personal involvement with families in the suburbs.'

With the rise in the numbers of young people fleeing to Syria, the type of 'personal assistance' provided by the organization became insufficient, Nadia continued. Accordingly, *Brigade des Mères* started to give more focus to the prevention of the radicalization of youth and to providing support to affected families, not only on the personal level but also through the development of structured projects, a clearer agenda and a vision, Nadia continued. In an interview with Marie Claire, in 2016, she said that *Brigade des Mères'* efforts were directed at three major problems: 'excluded children who cannot find a school; women who are victims of domestic violence; and the prevention of radicalization'[65]. One way of preventing radicalization in Nadia's work, like *Inspire*, was providing counter-narratives to the religious rhetoric of 'Islamist recruiters of youth.'

> We explain that the religion that these kids are dictated by those recruiters in Qur'an Schools is not the real authentic religion … We do this through awareness programs or education workshops. Sometimes we do one-to-one work when needed. We see a 14-year-old girl refusing to listen to music believing that music is *haram* (sinful). We try to explain to her mother ways to introduce her daughter to counter-narratives … In some workshops, we show these children videos of others who returned from Syria speaking of how bad it was in ISIS territories and that it was not the 'utopia' they were told that they will find. We explain to mothers the importance of their roles as mothers. We cannot be mothers by just feeding our children while ignoring their other needs. We, mothers, should focus on our children's lives, actions and thoughts so they do not end up in Syria, while we are napping!

65. See https://www.marieclaire.fr/,nadia-remadna-livre-banlieue-enfant-brigade-des-meres,817379.asp

It took the organization almost two years to prepare its first structured project, while continuing to work on their usual 'everyday' activism. One of *Brigade des Mères*' first projects, designed in 2016, was what Nadia referred to as the *Théâtre de Rue* (Street Theatre). With the help of volunteers who would take part in street performances, the organization's aimed to 'reveal the reality of *Les Freres Muslimans*' (the Muslim Brothers), whose strict interpretations of the Qur'anic texts have turned youth into easy prey to groups like ISIS, Nadia asserted. In these performances, real-life stories revolving around how Islamists recruit young people in the *banlieues* were to be performed and narrated live in the streets of *Sevran*. The objective of this 'Street Theatre,' she said, was to show people the stark realities of lives in the suburbs from poverty and crime, women's domestic abuse to Islamist recruitment of youth 'in a comic and smooth manner so that women and children would be tempted to watch.' Performing real-life stories, Nadia perceived as a form of art therapy. 'People relate to stories, especially when they are about someone they know,' she explained.

In our first interview in April 2017, the *Théâtre de Rue* was still in the preparation phase. Nadia's vision, as she relayed to me, was to run it for three years, so that she and her team of volunteers 'reach everyone in the suburbs, not just *Sevran*.' For the preparations and rehearsals of this project, Nadia and her team gathered every Saturday for what she called *L'atelier d'ecriture* (the writing workshop), in which they invite someone from the suburbs to narrate their story while the 'crew' of volunteers wrote down the script. Her close relationship with her neighbours facilitated this step, she said. With the limited resources she had, I was startled by the confidence she demonstrated in the organization's ability to maintain such a huge project solely with what she described as 'dedicated' volunteers. Six months later, however, I learned from Nadia that the project was suspended, for the lack of resources and as the organization was in a process of negotiating a 'funded' offer to carry out another project, they preferred to wait. At the time, she did not mention anything about the new project, saying it was still in the 'brainstorming' phase. Unlike Sara's major projects that were carefully planned, funded and supported by the state or charities, Nadia's Street Theatre received no financial support, neither from the state nor from any private charities,

which may explain their failure to sustain its implementation and the decision to direct their efforts to a project that may have a better chance for funding.

As an activist, Nadia's rise to prominence, which she considered her life's biggest accomplishment was speaking to President Francois Hollande in 2015. On January 2015, two brothers forced their way into the offices of the French satirical weekly Charlie Hebdo in Paris. Armed with rifles and other weapons, they killed 12 people and injured 11 others[66]. Several related attacks followed in the same month. These attacks were seen as the worst in France in a generation. Following them, on March 2015, Nadia and her fellow mothers were honoured in a ceremony at the Élysée Palace, organized as part of the International Women's Rights Day, by President François Hollande, called *Elles Fonte La France* (They Make France). During the event, women were engaged in discussions with the regional delegations for women's rights and equality, sharing their experience and their reflection on the stereotypes they face as women, the path to professional equality and the place of women in the public sphere[67]. During discussions with the president, Nadia boldly asked:

> Why Mr President when something terrible happens in the suburbs, do we always call upon the imams, lawmakers, presidents of the football clubs, everyone–but never the mothers? Why always the men, but never the mothers? (Symons, 2016).

In one of my encounters with Nadia, recalling this event, she told me that journalists attempted to dictate to her what to say to the president. Yet, she chose not to conform, saying what she thought was needed to be said. Unlike Sara, Nadia is not a polished media performer. She is far more comfortable addressing a crowd on the street than talking politics in a TV studio. As such, her question to the president, she said, was not pre-planned or staged. She does not care whether she is addressing a president or a simple citizen, she told me proudly. 'I will always say what I believe is right,' she continued. Hollande replied to Nadia ratifying that he would personally visit her and her fellow mothers in *Sevran*, but he never actually fulfilled his promise. Nevertheless, the echo of this event has attracted

66. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charlie_Hebdo_shooting
67. See http://www.federation-femmes-administrateurs.com/revue-de-presse/journee-internationale-des-droits-des-femmes-elles-font-la-france/

significant media attention to Nadia and her organization. She became a prominent media figure who spoke as an expert of the problems of radicalism in the suburbs and the go-to mother when problems arise.

In collaboration with *France 2* Television Channel and with the help of Aziza Sayeh, Nadia exposed one of the men-only coffee shops in *Sevran*, in an attempt to show 'France' the reality of life in the *banlieues,* with the help of a hidden camera. 'We had to break this law of silence, she said to *France 2*[68]. 'In this café, there is no mix. It is better to wait outside' said one man captured in the film. He added 'we're in *Sevran*, not in central Paris.' The footage provoked outrage after its broadcast in the main evening news bulletin on the state-owned channel. The undercover report came amid rising tension in France after a series of terrorist attacks. In June 2016, a 25-year-old Islamic extremist killed a police officer and his romantic partner in a town west of Paris. In the midst of his attack, he pledged allegiance to ISIS via Facebook. In July 2016, a French-Tunisian man drove a truck into crowds celebrating France's National Day in Nice, killing 84 people and injuring many more, investigators say[69]. Axelle Lemaire, the minister of state for digital affairs, said that the footage of the *Sevran* coffee shop, appeared to show an 'intolerable' and 'illegal' case of 'discrimination against women,' the *Telegraph* reported[70]. However, the coffee shop's owner denied these allegations. 'It was customers the women were talking to. I have never refused to serve anyone,' he told the *Telegraph.* Yet, this incident came as significant publicity for Nadia and her organization. She explained, in an interview for *Le Monde*, that the report was, above all, to denounce 'chauvinism' and to show that at current times in France, 'there are places that look like Algeria'[71]. She also walked Emma-Kate Symons around *Sevran* and pointed to the exclusively male clientele enjoying leisurely beverages outdoor, where there were no women.

68. See https://www.francetvinfo.fr/societe/societe-quand-les-femmes-sont-indesirables-dans-les-lieux-publics_1958225.html
69. See https://edition.cnn.com/2015/12/17/world/mapping-isis-attacks-around-the-world/index.html
70. See https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/12/17/french-bar-tells-women-isnt-paris-men/
71. See https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2017/02/03/a-sevran-les-femmes-sont-elles-vraiment-indesirables-dans-les-cafes_5074244_3224.html

Despite the massive media attention that *Brigade de Mères* has received until 2018, the organization did not succeed to implement even one structured project. Most of their work continued to revolve around in-person support, conference presentations, media appearances, networking, debating classes and self-esteem training for the people standing 'closest to the border between childhood and terrorism.' Finally, in 2018, Nadia told me that the organization started to work on a project named *Vigiparents* an awareness program that involved families of the suburbs aiming at preventing the Islamist radicalization of their children. At the time, Nadia told me she was seeking funding from several charities. I, later, learned that the project was launched in April 2018, right after the release of the latest government's anti-radicalization plan, in February 2018. Later in 2018, Nadia told me, on a phone-call, that the promises of funding have not yet materialized and they would implement the project, like the rest of her work, on a volunteer basis. In a speech on February 2018, the French Prime Minister, Edouard Philippe, announced a new national plan against Islamic radicalization. The plan consisted of sixty measures to better identify potential Islamist radicals. The proposed measures included providing counselling for minors returning from Syria; removing government agents who have been radicalized, and; improving and monitoring religiously affiliated schools[72]. These measures, Nadia told me, 'are what we have long called for and long waited for.' Nadia told *Le Figaro* that the objectives of *Vigiparents* were to 'propose tools in coherence with the government's plan of action against the radicalization of youth, to restrain the spread of this phenomenon, which divides us as citizens and jeopardises the foundations of our republican values'[73]. This step seemed to have been a divergence from her earlier rejection of working in-line with the government's plans. In a phone-call she told me 'I think the government has begun to listen to us, which reflects on their plan of action.' Once more, the trope of defending an embattled *Laïcité* and the integrity of the Republic continued to be the crux of Nadia's narrative, despite continuing to be critical of state policies at times. *Vigiparents* was unveiled in 2018 in the presence of Valérie Pécresse, the President of the region of Ille-de-France and

72. See http://www.loc.gov/law/foreign-news/france-government-announces-national-plan-to-prevent-radicalisation/
73. See http://premium.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/2018/04/08/01016-20180408ARTFIG00137-impliquer-les-familles-pour-prevenir-la-radicalisation-islamiste.php

Patrick Karam, the vice-president in charge of sports, recreation, citizenship, youth and community life[74]. In a phone-call, Nadia told me that the project, up to this moment, works in collaboration with Ille-de-France council, that is providing *Brigade des Mères* with consultancy fees, which she claimed to be the first 'little' financial support she received.

***Brigade Des Mères* at Present**

Unlike *Inspire* which ended up closing its doors, Nadia seems to be picking up momentum once more, with a newly designed and updated website and many opinion posts on the organization's Facebook page. Nevertheless, with or without a structure, Nadia's strength, as she perceived it lays in her grassroots work and in-person support. Her 'everyday activism' was what kept her going, she told me. She often participated and even planned protests against what she called 'the Islamisation of government officials' and 'the lack of measurements against the Islamisation of the French society.' In December 2016, she delivered a speech at Avignon TEDx discussing means to 'save our children from radicalization.' On March 8, 2017, she and the organization joined Abdelghani Merah, elder brother of the terrorist Mohamed Merah, in Strasbourg in his tour around France to alert the rise of Islamic Fundamentalism[75]. Long after I physically 'exited' the field with my last interviews conducted in August 2018, I am still in touch with Nadia by phone. She seems to be struggling to keep her organization alive. Her grassroots work is still going on; however, it is clear that it is becoming less urgent, with ISIS territories falling one after another. With the lack of funding, her hopes for bigger projects have not materialized, yet, as she repeatedly told me 'our work with the grassroots will continue regardless of whether *Brigade de Mères* gets funded or not.'

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74. See https://francais.rt.com/france/49489-brigade-meres-lance-son-nouveau-plan-anti-radicalisation
75. See https://www.lalsace.fr/actualite/2017/03/07/la-longue-marche-du-frere-de-merah%20.lalsace.fr2017/03/07/la-longue-marche-du-frere-de-merah

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined some of the projects of both *Inspire* and *Brigade de Merès* and the wider context in which these projects have taken place. Most of the projects undergone by both organizations did not come to being through planning and strategising *per se*, but, as a response to events that were taking place in the social and political arenas. In the views of both Sara Khan and Nadia Remadna, Inspire and *Brigade de Mères* came to live because of the lack of response to these happenings. Both women have portrayed their work as 'urgent' in the face of these political events. The peak of the media attention directed at these organizations has also taken place when Muslim 'terrorists' were pictured murdering and engaging in suicide bombings and terror attacks taking place in Europe. The availability or the lack of resources, namely, financial, was a major support (when available) or constrain (when lacking) to the ability of these organizations to sustain their projects. In the case of *Brigade de Merès*, for example, the lack of funding was a major obstacle to the ability of the organization to carry out major structured projects. In the case of *Inspire*, its thriving was, in part, a result of its ability to maintain some financial support.

One overall problem seemed to have been the lack of specific institutional targets in many of these campaigns which tended to become diffused. The translation from raising certain issues and suggesting ramifications to the actual implementation of these projects seemed to have been obstructed by several issues; workforce, state support, etc. The work of both Inspire and *Brigade de Mère* , thus, do not fit neatly within the definitions of a social movement that uses a high level of structure, networking, mobilising strategies and so on. The work undergone by these organizations has looser, more fluid structures and forms that are more diffused and decentralised. However, both Sara and Nadia saw themselves and their organizations as 'unique' compared to others who may be engaging in the same work. They attribute this uniqueness to having first-hand experience at the grassroots level and within civil society in general. For Sara, having been active within Islamist groups and for Nadia, having lived and worked for long years in close contact to the suburbs has given each of these women the ability to claim 'knowing more than anyone else what needs to be done.'

However, what is obvious here is that it is not enough to, simply, consider the achievements and failures of the activism of these organizations with reference to specific projects; one has to consider several other factors, such as government attitudes and policies, as well as Islamist discourses and campaigns. The way debates around women's issues developed, like the issue of gender segregation, for example, make one point clear: that secular Muslim women activists as opposed to others whose ideological references are Islamic, do not only struggle against general obstacles to women's rights but are also fighting against the increasingly Islamised forces. In the following three chapters of this thesis, I focus on these debates and the underlying political culture in which they have taken place.

V. LIFE STORY NARRATIVES OF FIVE MUSLIM WOMEN: JOURNEYS TO ACTIVISM

> We make sense of ourselves, our relationships, and our place in the world through story-telling. Our identities are configured as we interpret and reinterpret experience through this narrative process (Guest, 2016, p. 33).

Adopting a narrative approach that posits that we are 'storied selves' (Andrews, et al., 2008) who understand and create ourselves and the world through story-telling in a multitude of forms and interpretive processes, I draw on the life stories of five Muslim women activists battling religious fundamentalism as a means of understanding their particular lived experiences and the ways by which they see themselves in relation to the wider political struggle they are involved in. Embracing the nature of storytelling and investing in the everyday practices, relationships and experiences that are entwined in them is a useful theoretical and methodological tool for exploring the development of political identity (Guest, 2016). From a narrative perspective, the impulse to tell stories about our lives offers a means of producing a self that persists through time giving meaning to a set of distinct events through story-telling (McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2014). In offering a sense of continuity, narrative processes have the capacity to enable individuals and collectives to experience fragmentary and conflicted events, as socially and culturally recognisable and meaningful (Riessman, 2008). As such, narratives reflect both structure and agency: they are the outcome of individual reflection and crafting, but are also socially structured, since social positioning and experience make available particular kinds of discourse (Davis, 2002).

In this chapter, I draw exclusively on narratively-informed life story interviews conducted with five Muslim women activists in Britain and France; Sara Khan and Henna Rai in Britain; and Nadia Remadna, Serenade Chafik and Aziza Sayeh in France. In this chapter, I recount how each of these women described different trajectories of her life. Across these differences, I reflect on what made it possible for them to navigate through and sometimes resist the social structures in which they are embedded and finally arrive at

this particular arena of activism. By recounting these stories, I am not assuming that they are typical of all Muslim women activists battling religious fundamentalism, instead, my aim is to shed light on the significance of these personal stories in revealing a complexity that may have not been easily revealed having chosen another method. These life stories uncover points of connection and convergence, which transform particular individual meanings into a form of collective when considered together. The analysis shows how these women's paths to activism were narrated as tough, challenging, meaningful and inevitable. All five women were keen for me to develop an impression of them as women of strength who are able to overcome all odds. Personal relationships, socio-political events, feelings of resilience and of being different all formed a narrative collective. These complex and often moving tales require much more space and consideration than is possible in this thesis, but I hope that my brief recounting of these stories provides some insight into the variety of experiences, motivations and incentives that sparked the arena of activism these women became involved in. In this chapter, I focus on the formative experiences of each woman leading up to her conscious explicit commitment to activism. I end with a discussion of the key insights, themes and distinct phases of their lives that signify their experiences.

SARA KHAN: 'I SAW IT ALL CLEAR AND CLOSE'

Sara Khan is a British human rights activist and founder of *Inspire* in 2009. In my encounters with her, she narrated her experiences thoroughly, intensely and passionately. Although we usually met in public places, our meetings took a relaxed setting. She openly and passionately narrated her story in lengthy responses to my brief open-ended questions. Initially, she was reluctant to recount her life story, thinking she may publish an autobiography one day. Yet, she ended up narrating a prolonged and detailed account of her life. During my first interview with her, she told me not only about her upbringing, education, involvement in activism, career, marriage and children, but also; her aspirations, problems and insecurities and the joyful moments as well as the painful ones. Two key themes emerged from her narrative. First, her 'insider' experience with Islamist

organizations, for her, was a key driver to the development of her inclination to 'secular' activism in particular. Second, the support of her parents and understanding husband, in her view, was a reinforcement of her activist 'bug.' Her political identification was intricately bound to particular times and places in Britain, illustrating the fundamental relationality and social embeddedness of her activism. The Salman Rushdie controversy brought her to Islamic activism in search of identity, while the 7/7 London bombing, the 'straw that broke the camel's back' took her away from faith-based organizations bringing her to secular activism. And finally, common to all stories recounted in this thesis, anger was and continues to be a core stimulus to her perseverance in battling different forms of inequality.

A Little of Each World

Sara was born in Britain in 1980. Her parents of Pakistani origins settled in the city of Bradford in the sixties, after the Second World War, when significant numbers of Muslims immigrated, settled and made their impact on British society. In Britain, 'colonial subjects' immigrating to the United Kingdom were offered citizenship (Baxter, 2006, p. 166), which allowed them to settle and enjoy full political rights 'on a par with British citizens' (Joly & Wadia, 2017, p. 49) in ways other western European countries did not. Sara adamantly confirmed the centrality of Britishness to her and her family, describing her father as 'very Patriotic,' which she saw as 'unique.' Her father, contrary to many former generations, who dwelt in the 'myth of return' (Baxter, 2006, p. 167), embraced British life, seeing Britain as 'a land of opportunity,' where people 'work hard and get what they want in life,' she said. Yet, while possessing a strong sense of belonging to Britain as a 'home,' she upheld her family's ethnic practices and a sense of belonging to a homeland she had never seen. Brought up by a family that spent their youth years in Pakistan, she described herself as 'having a little of each world.'

Sara pointed out that even though religion remained a constituent of her family's lifestyle and culture, neither of her parents was 'overly religious.' In fact, her father 'was a firm believer in separating religion and politics.' She perceived her upbringing as 'quite liberal but … also quite conservative.' There were some differences in the way girls and boys

were treated, like dressing modestly, avoiding alcohol and late outings, she emphasised. The multiplicity of cultures, identities and perspectives she grew up around, in her opinion, had a positive effect on her. Describing her 'happy' childhood, she told me: 'I grew up with kids, we used to play outdoors, we used to dance, we used to skateboard' on a street where both Muslims and non-Muslims lived. But also, being born and raised in Bradford, 'a very conservative city,' she testified, had a clear effect on her upbringing. From the sixties, the city has become home to a growing Muslim community, many coming from rural conservative areas in India and Pakistan (Lewis, 1994). Bradford, Sara described, continued to be a 'complete mix.' On her street, most Muslim Pakistani families were 'quite liberal, quite progressive,' but in other neighbourhoods, many families were the opposite where girls 'were not allowed to wear western clothing, had no agency, had no freedom of choice and were forced into marriages.' She grew up witnessing this full range of diversity; 'it is never a monolithic homogenous picture,' she affirmed, repeatedly describing herself as 'fortunate' to have been raised in a 'liberal' and financially privileged family that encouraged her to pursue her education in a 'private … multi-cultural, multi-faith' school, as opposed to many young Muslim girls growing up in conservative families, who did not enjoy these privileges. These overlapping identities, she asserted, were effective in constructing her multicultural background, which she perceived as integral to being British. In her words:

> I had a lovely childhood, but at the same time, I remember going to school and being called a Paki and then seeing at the same time how some Pakistani Muslim families will treat their daughters; forced marriages; honour-based violence … seeing all this going on, you are trying to reconcile everything at the same time. So, as a child, you see all the conflicts. You see the good stuff and you obviously see the bad stuff and you are trying to just figure it all out … but I never allowed that to define me, I never chose to make myself a victim.

Being called 'Paki,' however, never defined her, she asserted. In our conversations, Sara seemed keen to downplay her experiences of racism. In retrospect, I am aware that this may only be what she wanted to portray. It may be that she does not associate with racism anymore as an adult, or that these experiences were pushed to the background as more vital issues currently at stake, like 'islamophobia,' come to the fore. Francesca Polletta (2009, p.

40) argues that feminists, in particular, have been 'keenly aware of the dangers of telling personal stories.' They worry that stories of injustice and humiliation, require that their tellers trade agency for passivity. Surely, 'representing oneself as a victim cannot but diminish one's capacity for action' (ibid). Instead, in these early childhood years, the key point that Sara was keen to make clear was that being exposed to a multiplicity of cultural and religious identities and growing up in an economically and culturally privileged family has helped her reconcile 'differences' while refusing to allow these differences to alienate her from the identity she chose for herself. Nevertheless, her search for identity re-emerged in her adolescence.

Lost in Identity Crisis

On January 14, 1989, 1,000 British Muslims marched through Bradford and burned a copy of Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses*[76]. The book was perceived as offensive, anti-Islamic and blasphemous by Muslims around the world. The international impact of this incident reached tragic magnitudes when Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini issued a *fatwa* proclaiming the death sentence upon Rushdie and all those involved in the publication of the book (Baxter, 2006, p. 180). The aftermath and controversy around the book continued to affect Muslims around the world for years, 'dividing Muslim from westerners along the fault line of culture,' and eroding a core western value of freedom of expression, against the view of many Muslims that no one should be free to 'insult and malign Muslims' by insulting the 'honour of the Prophet' (Malik, 2010). The Salman Rushdie Affair, Tahir Abbas (2005, p. 70) argues, transformed 'the politics of identity from a rallying around South Asian ethnic issues to an overt Muslim religious identity.' It was a few years after this incident when Sara turned to religion, in search of identity, going against her family's liberal stance. By thirteen, she became involved with local Muslim groups to 'learn about Islam,' and took on the *hijab*; a 'black tight one.' Even though becoming religious may infer a change in lifestyle, Sara insisted that her lifestyle has not changed describing herself, at the time, as a 'headbanging *hijab*-wearing chick.' Her *hijab,* she claimed was 'almost like an

76. See https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/9523983/The-Satanic-Verses-and-me.html

identity thing.' At thirteen, having not read or known any of the different theological arguments discussed around her, she assumed that it was 'what good Muslim women do.' It was the Rushdie Affair that heightened 'the tension that exists between the "freedom to" assert religious beliefs,' and the need to 'safeguard peoples "freedom from" religion (Dhaliwal & Yuval-Davis, 2014, p. 10). In Sara's case, that moment when she started questioning her own identity, she chose the 'freedom to,' without questioning much behind the meaning of her choice. It is clear that Sara was responding emotionally to her own uncertainties.

Opposing reactions faced Sara at home and among her friends for wearing the *hijab*. Her father, despite not being religious himself, was pleased with her decision, thinking that it would keep her away from going 'off the rails,' she said laughing. For her mother, *hijab* was neither a part of the Pakistani culture nor a part of the British. It was the flimsy *Dupatta,*' which reveals 'half the hair,' the headcover among her parents' generation. These concerns are interesting; on the one level they seem to have been prompted by the desire to fit into mainstream British society by not drawing attention to 'difference,' and on another level, her mother's fear, Sara thought, seemed to be mainly revolving around her marrying someone from another culture who would find this dress more acceptable and thus isolate her from the community. Yet, her father's approval provided her with some confidence. At school, reactions were divided. Her Muslim friends, to her surprise, stopped talking to her. 'Nobody wore it at thirteen,' but they did later when *hijab* became mainstream and belonging to the Muslim *Umma* became prioritized to belonging to Pakistan, India and so on. 'By the time I took it off, many started wearing it,' she chuckled. This heightened religiosity marked the beginning of a collective identity crisis when the newly found 'religious' identity of Asian Muslims in Britain shifted to political action that Sara rejected. However, the violence associated with the rise of political Islam became the starting point of her questioning of theology. Thus far, in her narrative, Sara seemed unwavering in asserting that 'radical' ideologies never persuaded her, even when she joined faith-based groups, attributing this to her liberal upbringing and to her devotion to Britishness, her country of birth.

Reclaiming Identity

Since the creation of the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) in 1997, it supported the activism of Islamic societies ISOCs in British universities, which Sara became a member of in 1998/99. While pursuing her undergraduate studies, she continued to support the local Islamic society and eventually became the 'sister in charge.' 'My social life was the Islamic society … again, never went clubbing, never had a boyfriend, you know, I was a good girl, I never did anything bad,' she told me. It was during that period that the 'hard-core *Salafis* began to appear.' Within ISOCs and amid battles between the 'radical' groups and the 'moderate' ones, Sara continued to search for her own path. Seeing the 'extreme' side of Islamist ideologies compelled her to stick to the 'moderate' through which she tried to campaign for gender equality, a pursuit she failed to achieve, she said. The concern of her parents and the 'extremist ideologies' she witnessed kept her away from the 'hard-core.' Her father, who was initially pleased turned the complete opposite, she said:

> Sometimes he would come back from the Mosque on a Friday and say "look, look at this," and show me leaflets by HT (Hizb ut Tahrir). "They had been giving them out after *Jum'ah* prayers, look at this, don't ever join this, this is extreme, you know!" … "and look what they are saying about Britain, things that are terrible." I think they were quite cautious so I did not get involved.

On July 7, 2005, four suicide bombers struck in central London, killing 52 people and injuring over 770[77]. Even though Sara's frustration with the ISOCS began earlier, the 9/11 events in 2001, 'seeing Muslims possessing strong anti-western sentiments celebrating these incidents,' the 7/7 London bombings were 'the straw that broke the camel's back,' she said. These events had not only had a profound effect on her future choices but also on her identity and ideologies. In the school of pharmacy, there was strong and sometimes 'radical' active Islamic societies. Choosing to study human rights after her graduation grew out of frustration with these ideologies. Further defined by the events of violence and the rising fundamentalism that calls for women's subordination in various ways, Sara finally

77. See http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/spl/hi/uk/05/london_blasts/what_happened/html/

turned away. In her pharmacy job, she saw young Muslims promoting 'extreme views,' and 'normalizing violence,' she told me. She saw 'women defending their own marginalisation,' an experience that immensely angered her. She explained:

> I remember how many women studying medicine wore the full *niqab* full *jilbab* … You know if you are a GP and a man comes in and you think he is got testicular cancer, you are gonna have to take his pants down … They would tell me "look sister, the role of a woman is within the home … working is not the primary role of a mother in Islam … we are just studying because in Islam education is good for Muslims … but once we get married and we become mothers we will stop everything." … So, you could just see the kind of contradiction … this was all so ironic … In the 1990s nearly 2000s you have an opportunity to have an education, where there are millions of girls who are denied the opportunity to have an education! … and you are sitting here taking it for granted! It really annoyed me, it really angered me actually and it still does.

In the latter quote, Sara revealed the contradictions that compelled her to question theology. It is clear that achieving gender equality was and continued to be a core objective to her. The relationship between gender denigration and rising fundamentalism, to Sara, is exemplified in that quote. The reaction of Muslim organizations–like the MCB and others–to the events of 7/7 and 9/11 made her realize that nobody is 'actually solving problems.' Seeing the rising 'extreme' ideologies and the denial that a problem exists forced Sara to rethink her own beliefs. Two issues were at the core of Sara's decision to turn away, she said; the ways they reinterpret scriptures to subordinate and marginalise women; and the ways they glorify the anti-western rhetoric. A remarkably personal decision marking her turn away was taking off her Islamic *hijab*. The 'obsession of Muslim theologians with women's clothing and women's bodies' angered her. Growing 'sick and tired' of how 'the issue of *hijab* has become inflated' was a narrative she constantly drew on. Taking it off was her 'very symbolic way of saying to the theologians that I reject your control … your patriarchy, your use of religion to silence me.' she asserted. 'All that discourse about women truly disgusts me … I reject that!' she said with immense anger. In our interview, Sara asserted that she was equally refusing the western obsession over *hijab* and how Muslim women were being

defined by it. As opposed to scholarly work that perceived *hijab* as an assertion of religiosity, 'agency,' or both, Sara stressed that by taking it off, she reclaimed her own sense of identity and 'agency' finding it 'absolutely liberating feeling the wind through your hair!' 'I did not want to be defined by it, neither by Muslims nor by non-Muslims,' she said.

Blessed with my Family's Support

Sara got married in 2003, straight after finishing her undergraduate studies. Her marriage was not arranged by her family, in fact, she was introduced to her husband by mutual friends. When she introduced him to her family, they were pleased; 'he was well educated, studied law and worked as a barrister,' she said. 'My wedding was a mixed wedding, yeah, it was a fusion of, I guess East meets West really,' confirming, again, the centrality of both worlds to her identity. She finished her master's dissertation during the first eight weeks after having her first daughter. She remembered being 'terribly sleep-deprived,' but she also remembered that her mother's support with the baby was what got her through the tough period. She was constantly smiling while recounting her graduation story and the pictures of her carrying her baby girl. For her, 'that was a sense of achievement,' because it was hard balancing married life, studying and parenting, all at the same time. Speaking about her motherhood clearly showed how important it was to her. Her relationship with her husband was also perceived as 'an achievement' that she was proud of. His support allowed her to grow and learn; he never stopped her from doing what she wanted and always encouraged her work and activism, she said. He did not object to any of her choices, including taking off the *hijab*. That kind of 'liberal attitude,' to Sara, mattered, because 'the marriage would have fallen apart' had he 'forced' her to do something 'against her will.'

Given the immense lack of support that women like Sara experience and the pressure they encounter within their own cultures for standing out publicly, it is clear how important the kind of support that Sara received from her family meant to her and to the survival of her activism. Unlike others whose stories are recounted in this thesis and who did not receive the same level of personal support, Sara acknowledged that she felt 'lucky'

to have had a family, a husband and some friends and acquaintances who provided her with ample support, both materially and emotionally.

Reflection: Activism as 'Being'

Sara's narrative here highlighted the intersectionality of the various meanings of race, ethnicity, gender and religion and the instability of these notions to her. Whether Islamic or secular, Sara saw herself as a 'kind of born activist.' Returning to her childhood years, she recalled accompanying her mother to women's events as her 'first taste of activism,' asserting that the image of an obedient, submissive Muslim woman was not always the case. Seeing different forms of gender discrimination within Muslim communities in Bradford magnified the sense of injustice other girls faced when she was a child. Sara's activism was born 'out of a struggle for justice, individual freedoms and human dignity,' she stated. But her activism was always there, she said, as 'some people are born activists while others not.'

> I think I have always been kind of born activist … I have always been passionate about activism … And I think if you have this activist bug, it stays with you forever. You cannot get rid of it. … You cannot escape it.

In her narrative, Sara frequently used the 'born-activist' trope to describe her activism. Even in her personal website, she described herself as a 'born human rights activist'[78] . She constructed her story by moving back and forth between her involvement in activism and her coming out as a secular woman activist who battles what she calls 'radical Islamism' and 'violent extremism,' experiencing the complexities of multiple identities from a very young age. Her narrative did not valorise a specific struggle; instead, she weaved a story that focused on personal experiences and 'findings' that led to her final destination of secular activism. Turning secular, for Sara, was the deepening of an already existing 'activist' identity, which she did not distinguish from being 'a woman,' 'a Muslim,' 'a wife,' or 'a

78. See http://sarakhan.co.uk/

mother.' In her narrative, she spoke of the ways in which her activism has informed her sense of who she was and how her actions were grounded in deep convictions and decisions.

Several themes in Sara's story seem particularly relevant to developing her activist identity. Her privileged background in terms of being raised by 'liberal' parents and educated in Western, multi-cultural schools; the socio-political events that took place during these formative years; and her family's support were, for her, the foundations of her journey to activism. A personal motivation to her decision to pursue this particular arena of activism, she pointed out, was anger. Seeing it all closely developed her sense of anger which was at the centre of her transformation from Islamically-oriented activism to the complete opposite of it. Her activism, for her, is something she was born with, rather than a decision. As such, her personal history was a necessary condition for her particular journey.

Henna Rai: 'Making Myself Through Hardships'

Henna Rai is a social and political activist and outreach specialist working at a grassroots level upwards against radical Islamism and violent extremism, sexual trafficking and child grooming. Henna was one of Sara's supporters and associates who collaborated with her in several projects. I connected with her through a member of the Islamic Society of Britain. On our first phone-call, she expressed her enthusiasm and eagerness to know more about my project and to be part of it. For her, studying women like herself and Sara who face contradictory challenges and backlash because of their work and their particular ideologies, is a step toward supporting the strengthening of transnational feminism. In her words: 'Isn't feminism all about solidarity; isn't that the key to victory?' Our first interview which was conducted on Skype lasted for a little over two hours, during which she was passionate, positive and very unreserved, answering every question without any hesitation. She talked to me in detail about her arduous childhood, abusive relationships and tough times. She openly recounted sensitive and painful moments in her life, some of which I have omitted, a dilemma I have discussed in the introduction of this thesis. Yet, I must confess, her voice at all times was positive and upbeat. Henna's story covers similarities and differences with

that of Sara. They are both Muslim, British-born during the same era which led to living through similar major socio-political events. One major difference is that Henna did not receive any support from her family and friends. Her major driver to secular activism was actually the hardships she faced. Realizing the accumulation of the disadvantages she experienced in her lifetime because of her gender and her personal convictions as 'injustices,' led her to action, while at the same time being lucky enough to come across available resources initiated what she perceived as a 'breakthrough.'

Learning to Question

Henna was born in 1975 in Leicester, the eldest of four and the eldest grandchild of the family on both sides. Her upbringing came from a 'very Indian' background, she said. She described her family as 'semi-Muslim.' In her childhood years, she was introduced to many facets of Islam; the *Barelvi*, a sub-Sunni sect almost similar to *Sufism* and the *Deobandi*.' Like Bradford, Leicester's Muslims arrived in the 1960s, but with the majority coming from a Gujarati Indian background who were forced out of East Africa and Uganda, like Henna's family, during the 'Africanisation' of the late 1960s (Kabir, 2010). Unlike Bradford's Muslims, as 'twice migrants,' Henna's family arrived with entrepreneurial skills and good education which enabled them to adapt easily and enrich the local economy (Lewis, 2010). She described her childhood as 'very-rounded' and 'balanced' far from a 'complete orthodoxy.' Like Sara, in Henna's narratives, she was keen to appear as 'moderate.'

Henna was introduced to the world of politics by her father's involvement with the conservative party and to the world of religion by his involvement in religious debates. Like Sara, she described her upbringing as modern, yet 'cultural,' pointing out the importance of distinguishing culture from religion. In her family, no woman was expected to wear a *hijab*; they were expected to 'cover their chests, to hide their bosom and that was just like a given,' she told me. Like Sara's family, donning a *Dupatta* was the traditional practice. The only time religion was at play around the family, she said, was either for *Jum'ah* (Friday prayer) where all the men go to pray and 'come back for a lavish meal;' or during Ramadan when everybody is fasting and they would have collective *iftars*. In our interview, Henna

explained that as most Muslim majority countries have been culturally influenced by Islam, observing Ramadan, or Friday prayer was not necessarily associated with being 'religious,' just like a secular or liberal Christian who celebrates Christmas would not necessarily be considered 'religious.' She also explained that within different countries, there are different cultural practices that are not necessarily related to any particular religion, like 'Blackening the Bride,' practised by some Scottish people living in rural areas for ages[79].

Henna's father seems to have left an enduring mark on her upbringing; she brought him into almost every question I asked. It may be due to her parents' tragic divorce, which she explained, led to her early separation from him. Henna was her father's favourite; 'the apple of his eyes,' she said. He was an engineer by profession but was very involved in the political scene of the seventies and the eighties. Her relationship with him seemed to have been a complicated one. She said that he was very aggressive at times, but 'when he wanted to be loving, he would be amazing.' He adored her eagerness to learn, she said. 'I would ask some really awkward questions like 'what does God look like?' and he would explain patiently, she said. On the contrary, *Mawlana* (preacher) in the neighbourhood's *madrasa* (Qur'an School) would tell her things like 'you will get struck down with lightning and burn in hell' for asking these questions. As a child, Henna said she was bright and 'very academically astute,' that she could have become 'one of those child prodigies that graduate from university at twelve,' if she had enough support. She took pride that she once sat on Margaret Thatcher's lap during elections campaigning and that she grew up around academics, political activists and theologians. For her, that was her first taste of activism; questioning the world around her. But it was also at that time when her parents' marriage started to break down, she told me. Their divorce left a profound and enduring mark on her leading to her early 'rebelliousness.' The lack of understanding she felt around her mother's family after the divorce and being separated from her father initiated her first acts of rebellion against her family and their conservative traditions.

79. In Scotland, friends and family gather and cover the bride with things such as spoiled milk, mud, sauces and other disgusting things. The reason is that if a bride and a groom can stand this humiliation, they will overcome any obstacle in their marriage.

The Rushdie Affair

Like Sara, Henna's activism 'was born out of anger.' Her parents' divorce, being bullied at school because of her academic achievements and the 'constricting' lifestyle of her mother's family, all resulted in feelings of 'anger.' When she turned fourteen, she witnessed the *Satanic Verses* controversy. Despite that this was not the first manifestation of anti-Muslim sentiment in the west, it was the identity of its author, Salman Rushdie–who was born into a Muslim family of Pakistani origins–that brought a massive backlash (Baxter, 2006, p. 184). Coinciding with the rise of political Islam in the Middle East, at its core, the Rushdie Affair spoke intensely of a Muslim sense of identity and place in British society (ibid). For Henna, the Rushdie Affair had a different impact. Instead of turning to religion in search of identity, like Sara, the learner in her compelled her to read the book to decide for herself. While she was reading the book, her uncles were protesting against Rushdie. She recounted:

> Ayatollah Khomeini calling for his death, fatwas, protestors knocking down the country right on my doorstep. This was how my rebellion came into play … One thing my dad always taught me is never go by hearsay; "always find out for yourself and research where the truth is" … I was 14 … bearing in my mind this book was created for an adult audience … I went up to the protest that was happening on my doorstep. … They were burning copies of the book and my uncle was leading … I turned to the *Imam* of our area saying "why don't you read it first and see what he's got … I read it and I can tell you it's not just Islam he's insulted, he's insulted Christianity, he's insulted Judaism, Hinduism." They did not hear any of that, all they have heard is "I read it"! … By then, the *Imam* at the mosque had issued a *fatwa* against me!

It is clear from the latter quotation that Henna was keen to show me her intellectual side, which grew alongside her rebellion, a narrative she used to counter the preconceived image of an uneducated, weak and subordinate 'Muslim' woman. The bullying, she said, did not stop at that *fatwa* issued against her for reading the *Satanic Verses*, but for being brought up by a 'single' woman. They were issued '*fatwa* after *fatwa* after *fatwa*,' to the point that people were spitting on her and her mother in the street, she exclaimed. Within

Muslim communities, people have the right to approach an *imam* (jurist) to question people's actions. It was in that sense that the neighbourhood's *imam* issued *fatwas* against Henna based on her behaviour. 'I was on the receiving end of that fanaticism and fundamental thinking because I dared to go against the grain and I still continued walking with my head held high,' she told me. Determined to appear as a woman of strength and resilience, Henna justified her mother's decision of moving away to avoid the bullying as a decision she wouldn't have taken if it was for her. After moving, she went to 'a Paki school,' and once more was bullied because of her academic advancement. 'Because girls were not expected to shine,' she said, she was considered to be a 'complete misfit.' In her words:

> Girls were expected to get married as soon as they leave school at 16 which is what my aunts did … with my head stuck in the books, not interested in learning household chores … I was not considered as one of those classical notions of 'bride' … my skin was slightly darker from the rest of my siblings and my cousins were a little bit fairer … I was given glasses at a young age … and I would not read books, I would eat them … So not only was I trouble because I was outspoken, questioning, critical, inquisitive, I was also not good looking enough …

It is evident thus far that Henna identified herself as 'different' from a very early age, with the development of her critical thinking, her academic advancement and later her rebellion against traditions. It is worth noting here that despite differences, like Sara, Henna felt alone in her identification of a problem, alone in the intensity with which she believed the problem to be important and alone in her 'obsession' to do something about it. Unlike Sara, she did not find enough support. On the contrary, she was faced with hostility from a very young age, for daring to step out of the traditional roles that define 'Muslim' women in her community and for daring to speak out and express opinions that do not align with what they believe. Yet, in her narrative, she relied on these hardships as a driver to activism.

Going Against the Grain

Henna continued to speak with regret about her early separation from her father, saying that if it was for him, she would have gone to Oxford or Cambridge and would have become

a lawyer or a politician. Like Sara, Henna's relationship with her father stood out in her narrative. It is interesting, however, that despite that these fathers were not always supportive, both women have not pointed out any criticism against them, while they both criticized their mothers at some point. It may be that both women were trying to rebel the 'subordinate' images of their 'traditional' mothers, thus identifying with their fathers as strong and assertive figures. In her mother's family, as the eldest, Henna was not only expected to take care of her younger siblings and to have a role in household chores, but she was also expected to be religiously adept. She did not exactly abide by these expectations anyway, but she wondered whether they were fair and whether it would have been different if her father was still there. She continued to rebel and eventually, after much struggle, she managed to secure a place in university despite her family's disapproval. Her politicisation, like Sara, started in university, where she became the leader of the student union. Like Sara, she started off studying medicine and 'hated it.' Soon after the beginning of her first year, she decided to transfer to Law but ended up doing Sociology. Once more, she recounted a story of how vocal she was during her university years:

> I had already been a vocal student … This was the time where grants were changing into student loans … I called … the head of the law department at the University … 'a fascist' *(laughing)* and 'a fool.' So when he saw my application to study law … he called me in for an interview and I went in and he looked at me … "now young lady, you want to take up a fascist subject?" and I looked at him and ego took over and I said, "actually no, I came to withdraw my application." I walked straight out! Biggest mistake of my life!

Not all university students become involved in student unions, let alone being leaders, yet both Sara and Henna were very actively involved in them, eventually becoming leaders of their unions. The confidence in their convictions and their belief in their leadership abilities evidently influenced the development of a sustained commitment to activism. Another interesting point is that both Henna and Sara have started off choosing careers that are difficult to get into and dominated by men, even within western society. This may also demonstrate how these women were aiming toward high achievements, trying to break the traditional role of a Muslim woman within their communities. Both went

against their families' ideologies in their teenage years, but while Sara was trying to find an identity by getting involved in Islamic activism rebelling against her family's liberal stance, Henna went against the grain rebelling not only her traditional family but the whole Muslim community trying to find herself purpose other than that of a mother and housewife.

Gender-based Violence

As mentioned in the introduction, a dilemma I was facing me while writing these stories was whether I should expose certain personal, painful and sometimes embarrassing memories these women have shared with me. The decision was to omit some extremely personal stories to assure that 'no harm' is inflicted on her by the publishing of this work. I would only point out that Henna has significant experience of gender-based violence. Perhaps what is striking about these 'traumatic experiences' is their role in her politicisation. What Henna realized is the profound connection between her political and ideological commitments and her lived experience. These abuses did not make her feel like a victim; 'I was far too strong of a person,' she said. Her anger and sense of connection with and a responsibility for other 'abused' women became Henna's biggest inspirations. Sara's activism was grounded in personal experiences, but Henna's activism was particularly gender-based.

In Search of a Purpose

Despite her clear convictions and active involvement in student activism, after graduation, Henna was uncertain of her 'purpose in life.' She was thirty years old and unmarried, 'an outcast' within her society. In an attempt to find her roots, she decided to go to India. It was unheard of in her family and around her Muslim community that an unmarried woman travels on her own, yet she did it. In India, she took various jobs. Her involvement in activism in India in 2006 came about by pure chance. Through contacts, she worked with an NGO that supported victims of human sex trafficking in Mumbai. During that time, she was introduced to the Mumbai anti-terror police who asked her to help identify 'sex traffickers' by interviewing their victims. Even though the job was risky, she accepted out of

a sense of responsibility and a desire to 'stop these criminals from committing further crimes.' This job was her first introduction to countering terrorism, she asserted. It was a discovery, a breakthrough that gave her the sense of purpose she was searching for. Having experienced fanaticism in many forms, she was determined to fight with all her strength.

From 2008, until the present-day Henna has become a dedicated activist battling 'radical Islamism' in Britain. She collaborated in various projects with Sara. She also wrote blogs and newspaper articles condemning acts of terrorism and fundamental Islamic ideologies. Unlike Sara, Henna was not able to find support for her activism. Having had the chance to work with NGOs in India then connecting with Sara and other women in Britain were her breakthrough to what she believed as something that has given her a purpose. Linking the local with the global, she has cast her personal experience in a larger social and political framework. These personal experiences and what she learned from them became part and parcel of the purpose she was searching for earlier.

Reflection: Activism as a 'Breakthrough'

Henna described her life as a series of personal and social experiences that facilitated her activism at different stages in her life in unique ways. Apart from one supportive friend, she said she neither received much support from her family nor women's organizations during these personally disruptive events which she experienced. Being surrounded by whom she called 'extremists' helped her gain a greater understanding of the extremist attitudes in general, be it religious, cultural or personality' extremism, she explained. Placing a significant weight on first-hand personal experiences for the success of community work and activism, she said: 'having seen many sides of extremism throughout my life, without even intending to ... I had that understanding of the nuances, which I don't think anybody does working in the arena but hasn't personally been impacted.' But unlike Sara who lived a 'privileged' life, Henna put much value on experiencing hardships as a means of developing resilience. It comes across clearly in her narrative that she was keen to construct herself as the strong unbreakable woman, who won't let a personal tragedy or a difficult

childhood stop her. It is a kind of 'armour' she puts on to be different from the stereotype of a weak vulnerable 'Muslim' woman.

> I had to go through these emotions to become a stronger person … I had to build myself up for the sake of my daughter. I was not supported by my family they were never happy with my choices in life. My choices may not be the best but they were mine and they were what made me the woman I am today … I gained a great deal of resilience. I got the thickest skin. I gained a lot more prowess in being able to cope with difficulties …This shaped me to be the person I am today. So, all these experiences, while being very difficult, were very welcomed to me. They helped me in the work that I am doing today.

Throughout her narratives, Henna presented her 'coming to activism' as an unfolding of things that were always there. However, she did not consider herself a 'born activist' in the same sense that Sara described. As opposed to Sara who perceived her activism as an existing identity that cannot be distinguished from other aspects of her identity, like motherhood, for example, Henna constructed two intertwined narratives; one of rebelliousness and another of a journey to self-discovery. Both narratives led to a path to social and political activism; something she saw as a breakthrough, something that gave meaning to her ongoing rebellion against various issues that she perceived as injustices. It was as though she was initially hurled into a vacuum, with no allies, no guidance, no direction and without a sure sense that what she was doing was right, until it all manifested itself in the success of her activism; a breakthrough.

Nadia Remadna: 'I Escaped Patriarchy in Search of Freedom'

A French community activist and the founder of *Mother's Brigade* in 2014, my encounters with Nadia were very different from those of Sara or Henna. Whereas Sara and Henna answered my brief open-ended questions in lengthy and detailed responses, Nadia was mostly distracted and restless, particularly during our first encounter where I met her at work. That day, Nadia was providing in-person support to a disabled 'Christian' immigrant from the *banlieues* (suburbs). She appeared to be particularly proud and keen on presenting

to me a demonstration of her activism in action. The first statement she uttered when we arrived was 'see Hind, we work not only with Muslim women, we help all women ... and men in need of help.' Her statement reflected a sense of defence that is most probably a result of the backlash she experiences in her everyday life and activism. While I continued to chase her around in efforts to commence our interview, in some instances, she would not wait for me to finish a question before answering and in other instances, she would give a response that is not necessarily related to my question.

Sporadic conversations about her ideologies, backlash and the significance of her work in the current atmosphere of a rising radical Islamism made up the first two hours of our encounter. When I had the chance to tell her about my intention to conduct a life story interview, she was delighted and replied with a chuckle: 'My life is a *Thousand Nights and Nights*[80]; do you have time to listen to my story?' It was, indeed, long and did end up being resumed in my second meeting with her. Unlike Sara and Henna, Nadia did not narrate her story in chronological order; she started with what she considered as her life's turning point. In the following account, I co-construct these stories chronologically in a way that would make sense to the reader, however, I maintain and highlight what was of most significance to her. Nadia's narrative often represented a series of moments related to personal experiences that appeared to have left a strong impact on her. Her major turning point was her escape from an oppressive and controlling father in Algeria. Nadia neither enjoyed a liberal upbringing, nor quality education. She constructed her narrative around the oppression she experienced and her strong desire to break free from it. Following her escape back to France, 'the land of freedom,' her country of birth, her everyday experiences among women and youth in the *banlieues* in her job as a social worker, gave her a sense of responsibility to help others avoid having to go through what she went through. Being deliberately silenced for years drove her way to activism. Throughout her narrative, the trope of the search for 'freedom' continued to be her main narrative she drew on.

80. Known in Arabic as *Alf Leila wa Leila*, a collection of Middle Eastern folk tales compiled in Arabic during the Islamic Golden Age. It is often known in English as the Arabian Nights. The collection of stories that is constituted by a frame-tale focused on the narrator, Shahrazād, telling stories for a thousand nights. See

We Call Him 'Hitler'

Nadia was born in *Creteil*, in the *Ille-de-France* region in 1959 from Algerian parents who immigrated to France after the Second World War, when the French immigration policy was following a *laissez-faire* approach allowing entry whether or not immigrants held work and residence permits (Joly & Wadia, 2017, p. 58). Nadia's family was poor, she said. Her father worked as a train ticketing officer. Like most immigrant workers from former French colonies in North Africa, they came to France in search of jobs and better living. Her mother died when she was two years old; subsequently, they moved to a South-eastern suburb of Paris not far from *Creteil*, where they lived for about ten years. Nadia and her twin brother were the youngest of five; three girls and two boys. Their house, she said, was tiny. She shared a room with her two elder sisters, while her two brothers shared another. She described the house as 'claustrophobic, even when you open the windows.' In this house, Nadia and her siblings were always being watched by their father, so she preferred the outdoors where she could 'breathe.' She recounted that her father constantly portrayed Algeria as the 'real' home. As opposed to Britain, immigrants did not enjoy the same social and political rights on a par with natives; they were given a non-national or *étranger* (foreigner) status, thus deprived of civic, political and social rights (Joly & Wadia, 2017, p. 59). The dream of return was, thus, what many immigrants like Nadia's father always wished for. 'He never really felt that France could be a home,' she said.

Nadia frequently described her father as a tough, heartless man. She often, animatedly, called him 'Hitler,' a typical Middle-Eastern joke that implies being cruel. Turning serious she said, 'he never smiled, never showed affection and never took me in his arms ... he only used them to beat my brothers!' Yet, despite his sternness, he failed to impose Algerian traditions on her or her siblings, she stressed. Living in France, a secular state, made his task a difficult one. In the sixties, unlike the present days, the Muslim community in France was only growing. Islamic *madrasas* (schools) did not exist at the time. Yet, even though, Nadia and her siblings were enrolled in French state schools, the repression she experienced at home left her childhood 'a sad one.'

A 'Prison Sentence' in Algeria

When Nadia turned 15, her father 'deceived' her and her siblings into returning to Algeria saying they were only going for a summer holiday, she said. This part of Nadia's story made up a core segment of her narrative that she repeatedly drew on in our interviews and also in her book. She explained sceptically: 'his most dreaded thought was that one of his girls would end up marrying a French man!' Nadia's elder sister had already escaped with a French man, which immensely troubled him. What he called a 'summer holiday,' In reality, turned out to be a one-way trip to Algeria, she recounted with immense sadness apparent in her voice. They travelled to Algeria by sea, arriving at the city of *Annaba*–a coastal province north of Algeria–were they stayed for two months. Sighing she exclaimed, 'we lived by the sea for two lengthy months, yet, we were never allowed to go to the beach, nor anywhere else!' It was in *Annaba* when her father, finally, revealed his actual plan, which was extremely shocking for Nadia. 'France was home. I knew nothing about this country which he called "home!",' she exclaimed in sorrow. 'I have Algerian roots and I cherish them, but I was born and raised in France; my principles and convictions were born in France, not in Algeria,' she asserted. After the summer, they all moved to *Setif*–a province East of Algeria–her father's home town, where they settled from then after. None of her siblings were allowed to attend school, except for her, but only shortly. And '*Voila*, we lived in prison for ten years,' she said explaining that they were almost always locked indoors with female members of the family, while her father was always outdoors with his 'male' companions. With a grin, she murmured that the only good thing about living in Algeria was that she never had to see her father:

> I loved my aunts; they were kind to us. They were poor but happy. They allowed us to watch television. I think because our mother died and they considered us orphans, we were given extra attention. In *Setif*, women were segregated, while men inhabited other spaces … yet even the boys were treated badly; my father did not want any of us to inherit French culture … He was an ugly man; he had an ugly personality. He used to drink and he used to date, yet he forbids us to do the same. My brother ended up submitting to military service just to

> get rid of his authority … We did not see him much, yet we received his commands constantly!

The latter excerpt from Nadia's interview reveals the extent of oppression she faced during the ten years she lived in Algeria. It was during these ten years that Nadia developed her sense of anger and frustration toward traditions she never accepted, which led to her life's turning point and escape back to France. For ten years, Nadia lived in despair, unable to accept a society she perceived as 'double-standard,' she told me. What she grew up to believe when she lived in France was 'freedom of choice.' Unlike Sara and Henna who perceived their identities as a mixture of both worlds, the East and the West, the Muslim and the Secular, at that point in her life, Nadia completely refused her Algerian identity. Her perceptions changed later, but her anger toward her father and her belief in her right to freedom of choice continued to shape her life. The lived experiences of patriarchy and gender discrimination in her early life were fundamental to her story and the seed that sparked her activism.

The Grand Escape

The late eighties in Algeria witnessed the emergence of *Front Islamique du Salut* (The Islamic Salvation Front), which was of great appeal to a devout peasant population upon whom socialism has been imposed for a quarter of a century. Nadia noted that, during these years, she has witnessed the transformation of the Algerian public sphere. Even though her aunts allowed her to watch television, 'it was tedious, because instead of playing romantic songs … television has become a platform for Islamists,' she said with sorrow. After those ten years of what Nadia called a 'prison sentence,' she decided to escape. She was 25 years old. The story of her escape to France, like the story of her 'prison sentence' in Algeria, was the most recurring in her account. It was the night before *Eid* (Bairam), she recalled; 'I barely slept, anxious that I won't make it on time as planned.' It took me four weeks of planning for the escape … I had plenty of time to plan, no education, no job, nothing!' she said mockingly. Nadia knew that her father will head to the mosque for the early morning *Eid* prayer, just

before the slaughtering of the sheep, she said. She put on her *haik* pretending to be going to prayer with the women and disappeared.

Nadia's experiences resonated with witnessing the 'Islamisation' of the Algerian society, which made it even harder for women to negotiate their place and their rights. These experiences made clear to her the stark cultural differences between France, where she identified as 'home' and Algeria, where she perceived as 'prison.' As a matter of fact, the conflicts that were taking place in Algeria between the state and the *Front Islamique du Salut* giving rise to a radical version of Islam has affected the image of Muslims in France, especially as bombs were exploded in Paris in the 1990s (Joly & Wadia, 2017, p. 64). The France of equality and freedom that Nadia left earlier had changed by the time she returned. It was in the 1990s when the term 'Muslim' started to emerge, replacing the earlier term *Maghrebi*, portraying immigrants as 'the other,' and Islam as the new enemy.

The Land of 'Freedom'

As a woman from an Algerian Muslim background when Muslims were becoming the 'enemy,' and with almost no education, Nadia's life in France was hard, yet, she was ecstatic to be back, she said. 'Nothing would ever be worse than the years I spent in Algeria … they will always be remembered as the worst ten years of my life,' she said. In France, despite the hardships of trying to find a job with no education requirement, she felt safe; 'I am a French citizen, here my father cannot force me to do anything I do not agree with anymore.' Nadia's escape resulted in her father declaring her 'dead' to him, she told me, but that did not disturb her. 'I wanted to get as far away from the family as I can,' she explained. In Paris, with some struggle, she found a job as a house cleaner with a Jewish Family. She lived with them and was treated like a family member, she continued. She spent a year and a half with them while saving money to go back to school. Her tough experience in Algeria inspired her strong motives to change her life. She knew it would be hard, but she recalled how happy she felt being back in Paris, back to school and even working as a waitress. 'I lived like any French woman; I went out with friends, to the movies and to the beach … Everything I could not do in Algeria, I did in France,' she told me with delight. Freedom

was a word she repeated throughout her narrative, like a mantra. It has become her greatest goal and her inner driver to a growing political consciousness and awareness of social and cultural discrimination, that is not only happening in Algeria but creeping to France. And even though her image as a Muslim, like many others in the *banlieues,* was becoming a source of threat to French people because of the rise of Islamism, her worry of seeing her beloved France transforming into a 'little Algeria' was and still is a major concern to Nadia.

Among her friends in Paris, Nadia described herself as the bravest, most courageous, a risk-taker and also a leader. But she also perceived herself as benevolent and humane, which, she said, what made her choose social work. She lived in the *banlieues*, which are occupied by a majority of unprivileged Muslims (Amara & Zappi, 2006). With the rise of political Islam, a negative image of Islam prevailed, equating it with 'communalism ... anti-republic, anti-democratic ... and with terrorism' (Joly & Wadia, 2017, p. 64). In the 1990s, the dispute over the wearing of the Islamic *hijab* in schools had further intensified the problem as Muslim women became objects of contention between the majority society and North African Muslims. Witnessing all that, Nadia said, she was compelled to help immigrants with the various problems they face in their everyday life. She started helping Muslim women who were experiencing domestic violence. She did that on a personal basis, then later she took on a job at the council where she had more authority. Like Sara and Henna, Nadia's personal experiences seem to have had a profound effect on her life and her choices. As mentioned in the introduction, a decision to omit some personal stories has been made to assure that 'no harm' is inflicted on the narrators of these stories. Here, I would only point out that Nadia recounted entering into a relationship with a controlling and abusive man, ultimately leaving her the single mother of four children. Like Henna, experiences of abuse did not make her feel victimised, instead, they motivated her to help women having similar experiences. The realization that she had the capacity not only to take action in her own personal life but also to take action in the public sphere, was a lesson she learned from her experiences. Further, becoming a single mother of four young children helped her realize what she believed to be 'unique strengths.'

Refusing to be Silenced!

For years, Nadia continued to work as a social worker. In the early 2000s, with the perception of immigrants as *Francais de Papier* (French on Paper) by some far-right groups, Muslims continued to suffer painful stigmas (Joly & Wadia, 2017, p. 63). The September 11th events complicated the situation even further (Joly & Wadia, 2017). In *Sevran*, a commune in the North-Eastern suburb of Paris, where Nadia lived, she saw types of men controlling women, who were worse than the men in her own life, she said. They did not just beat their wives; they also forced their teenage daughters into marriages. In our few encounters, Nadia continuously displayed great distress for the 'sexism' and 'misogyny' she witnessed in the *banlieues*. Her experiences in *Sevran* pushed her even further to devote her life to social work and later establish her own organization to battle the radicalization of youth in the *banlieues*. In her words:

> When I was young, I wanted to be a lawyer. I wanted to help women in Algeria, but I could not do that. Social work has given my life a new taste. I hear many stories ... A woman burned by her brother because she was not a virgin when she got married. He treated his sister as if she was his toy as if he owned her ... as if it was normal to do so ... They sleep with women, then they claim these women are loose and cheap! ... Girls as young as four were being forced to wear *hijab* here in France! ... What I see in France now is even worse than what I saw in Algeria. Seeing the events of 2005 when they went out and burned the streets ... Seeing those Salafists with my own eyes; I had to speak out. I told my colleagues, I told the mayor, I kept shouting for eight years but no one listened, they did not believe me!

It was when ISIS was created in 2013, attracting young Muslim and convert boys and girls from France who fled to the so-called Caliphate, that Nadia began to speak out independent of the council. Many of these young girls and boys fleeing to ISIS lived in the *banlieues* and attended Islamic *madrasas* (schools) where they were radicalized, Nadia exclaimed. Knowing the *banlieues* inside out has given her a sense of authority to speak out perceiving herself as an expert. What Nadia has seen from the 2005 riots until the 2013 rise

of ISIS is a transformation of a country. By 2014, Nadia's outcries began to attract some journalists. It was then when she faced immense backlash from her colleagues who claimed that she had no right to publicly express her opinions. 'But it was not because of my job's association with the council that they claimed I cannot speak, it was because I criticize the government for not taking measures to fight the rising Islamism,' she continued. Accordingly, a new quest was to start. Establishing *Brigade de Mères*, where she can be 'free to say' what she believes is right, she perceived as a natural step forward. Finding the government incapable of taking serious action toward the problems of the *banlieues* and believing that she possesses unique qualities and first-hand experiences which renders her the most suitable for the role, she abandoned her job to establish what has become a brigade of more than 1000 mothers, she said.

Reflection: Activism as a 'Natural' Step

Experiencing socially disruptive events that correlated with her personal experiences facilitated Nadia's journey to activism at different stages of her life. Growing up with an oppressive father and spending her adolescence and early youth in a repressive society, sparked her early sense of injustice that created her rebellion against her father and her belief in her right to freedom of choice. Unlike Sara and Henna, Nadia was not exposed to a liberal upbringing or quality education. Her rebellion arose entirely from oppression. The lived experiences of patriarchy and gender discrimination in Nadia's early life were fundamental to her story. This fragment of her life story, as she continuously said, was her life's major turning point. Further, her everyday experiences with women and youth in the *banlieues* contributed to her strong sense of responsibility to help those who had similar experiences. Witnessing the rising extremism forced her to take an unconventional step. Being silenced in her job with the council pushed her further along her path. Her awareness of injustices and her belief in her own voice, for her, are qualities she acquired at a young age. Yet, being an activist was not a decision she took, but a natural step. As a social worker already, establishing *Brigade de Mères* came as a natural upgrade. Unlike Sara who viewed her activism as intertwined with her identity and Henna who viewed her activism as a

'breakthrough'; a discovery of a sense of purpose she sought earlier, Nadia viewed her activism as a 'natural' step to her aspirations.

Serenade Chafik: A Lifelong Battle Against 'Contradictions'

Serenade Chafik is a French-Egyptian writer and activist who fights for women's rights and defends the principles of secularism. She worked in marriage counselling and family planning in France for almost a decade. Along the way, she collaborated with Nadia in her battle against radicalism. I connected with Serenade, like Nadia, through Marie-Laure Brossier, a French activist and Web designer who worked with Nadia earlier. During our first phone-call, she expressed her interest in my project and my own story which she had heard about earlier. She was excited that I am particularly interested in secular Muslim women. Our first interview, which was conducted in a café in central Paris, lasted for almost three hours, during which, she was very motivated and positive. Like Nadia, she was excited to tell me about her present work. She talked to me in great detail about her activism, her convictions, ideologies and challenges, all before I asked any questions. The interview took a very friendly form; two Egyptian feminists interested in knowing one another. Unlike Nadia and later, Aziza, Serenade did not reiterate the story of her fight for her daughter against FGM, even though she considered it her life's turning point. She talked about her childhood, her family, her marriages, her move to Paris and her present work in ample detail. In her narrative, several themes seemed particularly relevant to developing her activist identity. Her intellectual upbringing; her education; her love of reading in particular, were major drivers to what she called a 'way of life' rather than 'activism.' Her personal battle against FGM and growing up spotting ideological 'contradictions' in relations to claims of progressiveness and liberalism around her family and friends played out in her feelings of anger and frustration and her desire to make herself heard.

The Ugly Duckling

Born in Egypt in 1965, Serenade is the daughter of a renowned scriptwriter and the co-founder of one of the Egyptian Leftist Parties. In Egypt, she attended a Catholic school. As the Egyptian education system is poorly funded and overpopulated, Catholic schools, partially funded by the Church, were a better alternative for her family—who were educated but not rich—as they provided good education for reasonable fees compared to independent schools. In Egypt Catholic schools were renowned for their strict, yet good schooling methods and their non-discriminatory attitudes toward different faiths. Despite her parents' leftist politics and their claim to be liberals and progressives, Serenade experienced contradictions between their public opinions and their private attitudes. In public, they were staunch supporters of gender equality, women's rights and freedom of speech. In private, these opinions were altered. Serenade described them as 'double standard,' accepting and sometimes celebrating gender inequalities. She was a lonely child and had no friends; preferring 'the book' as her 'only friend.' In school, she spent most of her time in the library rather than playing with her friends. And at home, she said, she would wait for everyone to sleep to read 'with a torch under the blanket.' She perceived her childhood as 'odd.' Being raised by activists/intellectuals, play was never emphasised either.

The growing confrontation with Islamists in the late 1970s, which pressured the Mubarak regime to implement more conservative laws towards women, drove Serenade to write opinion articles, which she was able to publish with the help of her uncle. She was only twelve then, a very young age for intellectual maturity by the standards of any country, not only Egypt. As a fervent learner and a young critic, she became critical, not only of the society she grew up in, but also of her own family, she told me proudly. Spotting the contradictions between the democracy and freedom of speech her parents were calling for and their private life that was more in-line with customs and traditions, she wondered if their actions were as progressive as they claimed to be. Serenade was also staggered by the way she was portrayed by her own mother as 'ugly' contrary to her brother who was seen as

'handsome.' Like Henna, she was told she will 'never find a husband' because of her looks. Serenade sounded resentful and, at times, angry when recounting these stories.

> Even though I was raised in a very intellectual and cultured family, I was still looked upon as the ugly duckling, because I am a girl, just like any traditional family. I have seen contradictions since I was six years old … And since then, I thought I may be appreciated by my family if I excelled in school. So, I started reading and writing. I read Karl Marx when I was ten years old … I was wrong, I continued to be seen as the ugly duckling because of my looks … My family was as 'double standard' as all Arab families … I could not accept that, I had to rebel to gain my rights with all my strength.

From a young age, she was able to acquire the personal and intellectual resources to critique the underlying structure of the gendered social life that enabled traditional practices within her family and the Egyptian culture at large, she continued. Like Henna, Serenade viewed herself as much stronger than her mother, because she had the capacity to respond to abusive behaviour by saying 'no.' Serenade did not just see these contradictions at home, but also at school. In Egypt, Catholic schools are usually stricter than other schools. Though she was academically astute, she 'was never safe from the sternness of her teachers' she said. She recounted some incidents that traumatised her at school:

> One day a teacher saw that my white socks had a red line on the side. She sent me back home to change the socks and wear plain white socks instead. I went home to change my socks, wore plain white ones and went back to school. And guess what? That same teacher gave me a late slip! Another incident was when I got 9.5 out of 10 in one of my exams. I was expecting to be praised, but instead, I was told: "Is Mary who got 10/10 better than you?" … In a nun's school, you are required to feel guilty all the time.

This fragment of Serenade's life was very vivid in her memory. It had a clear impact on her life, influencing her perceptions and choices maybe even until present. In her opinion, being raised by an intellectual family was a double-edged sword. While it helped her acquire the personal and intellectual resources that enabled her to critique the underlying structures of what she referred to as meaningless and oppressive traditions

within Egyptian society, it also enabled her to become critical of her own family practices and rebel against them. Her school in Egypt, like her family, was an oppressive institution. Spotting these contradictions at a very early age validated the path to rebellion she has decided to take against her family in particular and the society in general.

Politicized in Paris

In the early 1980s, before Serenade started her senior school, her family moved to France. Her mother's continuous arrests and imprisonment by the Egyptian political police force, 'when everybody was imprisoned; The left as well as the Islamists,' she said, was the reason for their escape. Since Gamal Abdel Nasser seized power in 1952, one of the darkest phases of totalitarian autocracy in the region was established. Upon his death in 1970, Anwar Sadat followed suit. He promised liberalism and political pluralism but cracked down abruptly whenever he perceived a threat to national stability or to his own power. During his leadership, like Nasser, prisons were filled with Communists, Islamists and any groups who opposed his rule, without trials, accused of threatening national security (Osman, 2010). One of those opposing his rule was Serenade's mother and the political party she was associated with. After a series of detentions, the family couldn't tolerate anymore.

In the land of liberty, equality and fraternity, the relative autonomy and independence, Serenade enjoyed her only hobby; reading. Her intellectual and political affinities were spelt out once she started high school in France. Being a descendant of intellectuals, she became politicized rather swiftly; she said. By the time she turned 15, she had already joined the French Socialist Party. Her childhood 'loneliness' vanished and she started making like-minded friends. But her affiliation with the Socialist Party did not last and once again, she rebelled against the domination and rigidity of the party's leaders; 'because I cannot be a follower, because I prefer to be independent and because I have my own ideas,' she said. And despite being given a little more freedom in France, she was not satisfied, realizing that, being in France, she did not need their approval to be free:

> In France, when I started high school, I realized a very important thing … that I need not show my family that I am the best student so they recognize my existence. I do not need their approval. Eventually, I will leave them and start my own life.

Once again, Serenade's identity and political awareness were influenced by her rocky relationship with her family. What she rejected about her family, as a matter of fact, was the building blocks of what she endeavoured to battle later in life. Her priority after finishing high school was leaving her parents' house, she said. For that, she decided not to pursue higher education and instead go straight to work. Independence was her main concern. She landed her first job as a teacher of French language to immigrant women. Later, she started a career in social work, where she worked as a counsellor in a birth control centre in Paris, raising awareness on matters of domestic violence, unwanted pregnancies and so forth, she explained.

Escaping through Marriage

Serenade met her first husband during a holiday in Egypt in the mid-eighties. She was twenty years old at the time and had not yet achieved her dream of full independence. The rushed marriage, which was not objected to by her parents, was a way of escaping their control, she said. 'Needless to say, it did not last long,' she continued[81]. Serenade stayed in Egypt preferring to put up with societal inequalities there rather than going back to her parents in France. Not long after her divorce, a single mother, she met her second husband and this time escaping the society that scorns divorced women, she rushed the marriage and flew with him to Moscow to pursue his post-graduate studies. With her second husband, she experienced abuse and eventually returned to Egypt with her son from her earlier marriage and her newly born daughter. As after a few years, in the mid-nineties, one more time, she failed to accept the fact that her own society perceived divorced women as 'loose.' Often, when the topic of divorce is discussed in the Arab Muslim world, it is the woman who is seen as the source of the breakup. The pressure was intolerable that Serenade decided

81. Based on the decision I've taken and explained in the introduction and the chapter on methods, the details of Serenade's marriage relations are omitted from the recounting of her narrative.

to return to France, she told me. Nevertheless, the move did not come without further misfortunes. Within personal status laws in Egypt, as a *Wali,* the father has control over his daughter. That said, Serenade could not take her daughter with her to France. Being forced to choose between two evils; either accepting to be treated as 'subordinate' and 'loose' in Egypt, or to leave her daughter behind, Serenade chose to leave. She left with heartache, recounting 'it was the most painful experience of my life.'

A Matter of Life or Death

In 1999, following a court decision, Serenade obtained the right to host her daughter during the 3 months of the Egyptian school holidays. It was a bilateral agreement between France and Egypt that regulated this possibility. During one holiday, Serenade heard what she described as 'the biggest shock' of her life. Her daughter, who was only eight years old, told her that her grandmother was planning to 'circumcise'[82] her. Given Serenade's painful experiences with stories of FGM; and Nawal El-Saadawi's story of her brutal circumcision that she read at a young age, her life 'turned upside down,' she told me. Her reaction brought her national and regional media attention and became a major turning point that defined her life-path from then on.

> It is something I never imagined. He calls himself a progressive leftist! How on Earth could he think or allow his mother to think that way … My whole life turned around and I started running in courts both in Egypt and in France. I decided to keep the girl here and refused to send her back to Egypt. I resorted to the courts here on grounds of "the rights of the child first." But my ex-husband decided to escalate the matter. He succeeded in reaching the Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak at the time. He fabricated a story about me being married to a Zionist and publicized that I am setting up a plan against Islamic traditions! … Isn't this what always happens? Whenever a woman disobeys her husband, she is perceived as being against Islam!

82. The slang word used for female genital mutilation in Egypt.

Serenade did not win any of her court cases in Egypt. She thought that the 'land of human rights' would support her and save the girl from the threat of FGM. However, she was denied the right to refuse these brutal actions in the name of *Shari'a* that gives the father, as a *Wali,* unconditional rights to control his children. Her story reached massive publics, that the Egyptian president personally interfered asking the French president Jacque Chirac to send the girl back to Egypt. When her daughter went back to Egypt, Serenade wrote her book *Repudiation* in which she recounted stories from her childhood in Cairo, linking them to the political conditions through which women's rights declined. Feeling desperate and helpless, she decided to carry out a hunger strike. Her hunger strike, which she carried out in France, was widely publicized in Egypt, France and the Middle East. It lasted for 29 days[83], during which she lost her teeth, she showed me. Despite the massive publicity of the issue, she did not succeed in bringing her daughter back to France. This experience, however, turned her whole life further in the direction she already sought earlier; fighting patriarchy, sexism and the rising fundamentalism which, she believed, is particularly affecting women.

These experiences provided Serenade with what she described as 'perfect knowledge of the damage that may be caused by these bilateral agreements' that some western countries sign with Muslim countries. These agreements define commercial and cultural cooperation as well as legal cooperation. Concretely, for immigrant women, these agreements mean that their host country aligns itself with the legal decisions issued by their country of origin, even if it applies *Shari'a*, which contradicts with French laws, she said. This is 'repressing and discriminatory' toward immigrant women, she asserted. Furthermore, these agreements 'sweep the struggles of women in these countries against the Family Codes,' she continued. From then on, Serenade's battle became transnational rather than local, realizing that the global processes of Islamisation are, in reality, affecting the whole world, not only Muslim countries.

83. See https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/S%C3%A9r%C3%A9nade_Chafik

Challenging the Islamists

After the riots of Paris suburbs in 2005[84], Serenade had already started writing about the Islamisation of the cities. 'The state's non-response had left a void,' she said, 'leaving plenty of freedom for the Islamists to take over these cities.' For her, it was absolutely necessary to help the non-religious civil society to offer another perspective, a counter-narrative, what she called 'a different point of reference so that religion is not the only reference of thought for these youngsters.' 'Of course, I was not listened to, but we feminists, we are used to not being listened to, but that does not prevent us from saying and saying again,' she told me. She continued working with victims of rape and domestic abuse while battling fundamentalism through writings. In response to being silenced, compromised and frustrated by and with these experiences, Serenade started looking for alliances for validation and support. It was when she was introduced to Nadia and her brigade. Though both women come from very different backgrounds and adopt different standpoints regarding various issues—as will be discussed in the following chapter—they both aspired to prevent the radicalization of French youth by Islamist groups. Both women worked in co-operation for a few years until ideological issues stood against their continued partnership. In 2016, each went her own way.

Serenade continued working on her writings along with; organizing educational workshops; film screenings 'as a medium of expression and reflection with the public;' research on radicalization; and conference presentations through *Les Dorine*[85], an organization she founded in partnership with one of her colleagues. The organization was founded in response to various ISIS atrocities and the recruitment of youth from the *banlieues*. 'How could we be against violence and stay silent about what's going on? We say that we play a role in guiding and raising awareness, therefore we should do something,' Serenade told me. *Les Dorine* defended secularism as a prerequisite for the equality of all

84. A three-week period of riots in the suburbs of Paris and other French cities from October and November 2005. They involved youth of African, North African and (to a lesser extent) French heritage in violent attacks and the burning of cars and public buildings.
85. See https://lesdorine.org/2017/10/30/bilan-anticipe-dactivite-pour-lannee-2017/

citizens regardless of their gender, sexual identity, beliefs, or origins. Serenade described her activism as part of 'a fight against illiteracy,' and a motivation to 'create the political and intellectual conditions of a culture of freedom in accordance with principles of secularism.'

Reflection: Activism as a 'Way of Life'

As an ardent reader and a rebel from a very young age, Serenade perceived her activism as a 'way of life' she was born and raised to follow. Of the latter life stories, Serenade was the least likely to separate her life into pre- or post-activism. Her story of coming to activism, as she described, was interspersed with her narrative of the setbacks she faced throughout her life. She constructed her life as a habitual involvement in activism, beginning with writing opinion articles at twelve, joining political parties at seventeen and finally choosing social work straight after high school. Through her narrative, Serenade showed a deepening of an already existing oppositional relationship to the world, as opposed to a coming to activism moment described by Henna, or a step up described by Nadia. Serenade's perception of her activism, like Sara, spoke of the ways in which it has informed the sense of who she was. She perceived her actions as always grounded in deep convictions and decisions. Yet, unlike Sara, she was never lost in search for an identity. Also, unlike Sara who did not emphasise one particular struggle, Serenade pointed to the fight for her daughter as her life's turning point. A number of themes in Serenade's story seemed particularly relevant to her activist 'way of life,' among the most important was reading. Books played a particularly strong role during her childhood and teenage years, supplying her with inspiration and role models that substituted for more social forms of solidarity in situations in which she felt isolated and confronted by family and community.

Aziza Sayeh: Losing my Son to ISIS

Publicly known as the 'French mother who lost her son to *jihad*' and the 'first French to receive an official death certificate from ISIS,' Aziza is the only one among the women whose life stories are recounted in this thesis, who did not associate her journey to activism with

events related to her childhood years. And even though following the tragic loss of her son, she decided to dedicate her life to battle Islamic extremism, she did not once during our interviews identify herself as an 'activist.' Aziza started as one of Nadia's supporters, along with a brigade of over 1000 mothers. She, then, founded her own organization *Syria against Martyr Integrist* (SAMI), in collaboration with another mother called Dominique Bons, mentioned earlier in Chapter III. I met Aziza four times and conducted three life story interviews with her. The first time I met her at a café near Pairs *Gare du Nord*. She greeted me at the door with a smile on her face, appearing friendly and confident. She led me in when two waiters waved 'Bonjour Aziza!' and another gave her a hug and a kiss on her cheeks. When we settled in our seats, she looked at me and said 'I'm the first mother to receive a death certificate of my son from ISIS, many people know me and sympathize with me here.'

Aziza spoke little about her childhood, insisting that there was nothing special to recount about it. Most of the time we spent together during that first interview as well as the following ones, she recounted stories about what she perceived as her life's major turning point: her son's death. Her narrative, unlike most of the narratives recounted here, that often represented a series of moments related to personal experiences, Aziza's narrative mostly referred to this one single event. It was clear throughout her narrative that this event has changed her life course, compelling her to dedicate her life and resources to battle radical Islamism. It is sorrow at the loss of a child; guilt at what she may have done wrong; shame in the face of hostility from friends and neighbours that compelled her to the path to activism, as she herself described. What Aziza wanted more than anything out of her activism was to make sense of the 'senselessness' of what happened to her child and perhaps for something more meaningful to come out of this tragic loss.

A 'French' Upbringing

When I first met her, Aziza was 51 years old. She was born in Paris. Her grandparents moved from Tunisia over 50 years ago, she said, confirming that she was a third-generation French. Like Nadia, Aziza showed pride in being French. But while possessing a strong sense of

belonging to France, like all women interviewed in this thesis, Aziza upheld her family's ethnic practices and a sense of belonging to a homeland she had never seen. She spent her childhood years on the outskirts of Paris and got married at seventeen following her family's traditions. She has four children; three girls and a boy. Aziza had a massive family in Paris; grandparents, parents, siblings, uncles, aunts, cousins, nieces, as well as four grandchildren, she told me proudly. And despite following her family's homeland traditions in some aspects, she asserted that she was given a modern French upbringing. In her family, girls and boys were treated alike, unlike other traditional Muslim families, she insisted. What she was taught by her parents, she stated, was passed by herself to her children. She was raised mostly by her grandparents in a large family house where her grandparents, parents, uncles, aunts and cousins all lived together communally as they did in Tunisia. Aziza was close to her parents, but her grandmother was a special person to her because she spent most of her time with her, she said. Losing her grandmother to death 'left a huge space' in her life. It was her first experience of 'loss.'

From the very beginning of our interview, it was clear that Aziza's aim was to highlight her 'French' upbringing, defending herself from the accusations of 'raising her son to become a jihadi.' Confirming that neither herself nor any of her family or extended family were religious, was obviously what Aziza wanted me to perceive. As with all stories recounted in this thesis, all women activists whether in Britain or in France asserted that cultural or traditional practices were, for them, distinct from religious ones. In Aziza's case, it was not merely an understanding of what religion signified or not in her life; it was obviously the battle of her life. In her words, she told me:

> From the minute I opened my eyes to this world, I witnessed my father bringing his mates over for a few drinks of alcohol. My mother was very modern; she wore makeup and miniskirts. We did not have many restrictions when we were children. I even smoked … I quit ten years ago, but when I was a smoker, I did it in front of my father …He told me that even though it is unhealthy, it is not shameful for a girl to smoke. I was 16 then. He told me that respect has nothing to do with smoking, "You do not need to suffer every time you

> want to smoke by trying to hide, so you better just do it in front of me." This is how he thought and lived his life and this is how he brought me and my siblings.

As mothers are usually blamed for raising 'terrorists' which Aziza constantly criticized, clarifying that she herself was not religiously inclined and was raised by modern parents, just like any French child growing in France, was a constant narrative in her account. After the loss of her son, Aziza was very much concerned with defending herself from those who accuse her of her upbringing. She constantly explained to me that the ideologies reflected in the messages and actions of 'radical Islamists' had nothing to do with how she had raised her son. Like all women whose stories are recounted in this chapter, Aziza asserted that 'we,' referring to her generation, lived or understood religion to be 'a cultural aspect of our life.' This is further elaborated and discussed in chapter VI of this thesis. Within this segment of her narrative, Aziza expounded on this theme by explaining that getting married at a young age is related to Tunisian traditions rather than to any religion. As even though in Islam, women are allowed to marry at a relatively young age, in Tunisia women married young, even before the advent of Islam, she asserted. Another instance when Aziza affirmed her family's non-religiosity was when she told me that her father drank alcohol. With this statement, Aziza was striving to confirm that her family were never practicing Muslims.

I'm Not the One to Blame

With unmistakable pride, Aziza talked to me about each of her children, their lives and their jobs. One is a lawyer, another is a police officer and the third was studying to become an engineer, she said. Once more, defending the way she brought her children, she said 'I taught them to do what they see and feel right.' Aziza regretted not having the chance to finish her high school education because of getting married at an early age; a choice she made on her own with no pressure from her family, she asserted. 'Once one has children, it is difficult to have time for anything else,' she said revealing the importance of motherhood to her, saying that she enjoyed and cherished it very much. And for the third time during the first half-hour of our first meeting, she brought up Sami's death saying

'then, it was the tragedy; you bring children to this world, raise them, look after them, then lose them!' In France, the rhetoric around mothers of who have been labelled as 'foreign fighters' was of blame and accusations of 'raising terrorists'[86]. Mothers of 'radicalized youth' were and continue to be accused of having failed to spot signs of radicalization on their sons or daughters. Not only during our interviews did Aziza attempt to convince me that it was not her fault that her son was recruited by 'terrorists,' but also in many of the newspaper interviews, she conducted in France and outside of it.

Shortly after her marriage, Aziza fell pregnant, she said. Her husband owned a restaurant in Tunisia and was away most of the time. She refused to move to Tunisia when he asked her to do. 'France is my home; I don't mind visiting Tunisia but I cannot live there, or raise my children there. Also, I do not want to be financially dependent on him,' she explained. Again, in showing her refusal to leave France, raise her children in Tunisia, or become a stay-at-home mom, it was clear that Aziza was very keen to give me the impression that her son's radicalization was not a result of how she raised him. Her marriage ended in divorce years late, as it could not survive the long-distance, Aziza explained. Nevertheless, she did not seem to be disturbed by the ending of her marriage. She explained that her motherhood and the well-being of her children was her highest purpose in life, more than having a husband, stability or even financial security. In her words, she said:

> So, I stayed in Paris while he was in Tunisia. We lived like this most of our marriage. If you think about it, I raised the four children on my own anyway ... Children should not be the victims ... We chose to bring them to this world; it should be our duty to offer them the best life. We will be judged by God about how we raised them and whether we took good care of them ... So yes, I did it all alone and it was hard ... Actually, I got too busy with motherhood that I forgot I had a husband (laughing).

In the latter quote, Aziza implied that if upbringing could cause radicalization, then it was not her fault. Arguably, she implied that it may have been her husband's abandonment to their children that caused Sami's turn to religious fundamentalism, but

86. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wUIRexxqtps

not hers. Not only in the latter quote but in most responses to nearly every question I posed, she would bring a narrative that defends her motherhood. Aziza seemed to strive to prove to me that motherhood was and continued to be her priority, that she was not the one to leave her children, in fact, she left her husband for the sake of her children. Despite that it was hard and it may have been easier had she chosen to follow her husband to Tunisia, she chose her four children, sacrificing her own life and happiness for them to be raised in the same 'liberal' atmosphere she grew up in. This trope is not distinctive to Aziza, but to many French mothers who lost their children to ISIS. It was a trope that Nadia drew on as well. Even though she had not lost a child the same way these mothers did, she identified herself as one of them. What was special about Aziza, in her view, was that she was the first mother whose only son died in Syria. She had perceived this as a responsibility to defend, not only herself but others who lived the same experiences. The first part of the following section is the recounting of Sami's story in Aziza's own words. Here, I chose to put this excerpt in its raw form to illustrate the significance of this story to her in her own words.

Political Motherhood

> Sami did not want to pursue higher education and rushed into work. He received a three months' training and was awarded a certificate. He, then, started working in a neighbourhood called *Sevran*. He worked in concierge. As soon as he started his new job, he was offered accommodation. So, he lived on his own from a very young age. He was only 21 years old then … After a year and a half, we started noticing changes in his behaviour. It was influenced by one of his colleagues. He started praying all five prayers on time. Whenever he came to visit us, he would not listen to the radio or watch television. I was surprised. In the beginning, I did not talk to him about these changes, but when I did talk to him, *may he rest in peace*, I asked why the change? He responded by saying "isn't it good to pray? I'm also planning to go for *Umra* (Pilgrimage)." I responded: "you are still young, why the rush, you barely started praying!" But he did not listen. … I wanted to show him that I am not against religion if it was the religion we know. The peaceful one. To celebrate that he will visit Mecca, we invited some friends and relatives as well as an *Imam* (Preacher) to recite some *Qur'an*… We made plenty of Couscous for everybody … But something was not right; Sami was giving me hugs and kisses every five minutes as if he may not see me

> again. Still, recruitment and radicalization did not cross my mind at all … He was leaving on my birthday, May 2nd. On April 28th, 2014, he called his sister saying that he was not going for *Umra*; he was, in fact, heading to Syria … "I am going to protect and defend orphans there" … I felt like the sky fell over my head … I never thought my son or any of ours would ever get involved, if they know what could happen to their mothers if they did …

The latter are excerpts from Aziza's recounting of her son's escape to Syria. Throughout her narrative, Aziza continued to put weight on the significance of motherhood to her. In the latter segment of her narrative, she continued to draw on her motherhood in different ways. One example was when she described that 'if people know how traumatic it is to mothers having to go through such an experience, they would not have blamed them in the first place.' Another was when she said that 'if my son knew how my life would turn upside down by his actions, he would not have done what he did to his mother.' A third instance was when she asserted that 'signs of the radicalization may be confused for signs of religiosity which should not be worrying,' She further explained that as the Islam she grew up to know was a 'peaceful one' different from what is described by those radicals. Emphasising that her son left home 'from a young age,' was yet another way for Aziza to push the responsibility of his radicalization away from herself. By the time she started to feel something was 'not right,' it was too late to take action, as he was already gone, she continued. Here, Aziza's 'motherhood' served as her mobilising and empowering political identity. Political motherhood is the women's use of 'the power of motherhood' to justify engagement beyond the domestic sphere, evoking meaning within a given context and eliciting participation and support of collective action (Carreon & Moghadam, 2015). In her narrative, it was clear that Aziza used this 'maternalist' frame to legitimise her position and to generate sympathy for her cause.

The suffering that Aziza went through after the loss of her son and the pain she endured while trying to recover from the shock of this loss was immense, she said. During the brief period before his death, whenever he called her, she tried to understand the motives behind his escape to ISIS, but she failed, she continued. She tried to convince him

that what he was doing was not more religious than anyone in his family, she told me. In every phone-call, she tried to persuade him to return, with no success. While she recounted these stories, she continued showing immense sorrow and regret. 'Eventually, Sami did not make it back,' she pronounced with grief. Ironically though, he died in a car accident not as a 'martyr,' as he was wishing, she said. His death certificate, which she received from the Caliphate following his tragic death, she said, was accompanied by a video of his burial and funeral. After his death, Aziza admitted, she went into a deep depression, turning to anti-depressants seeking relief from the agonising pain she experienced. She receded from social life and confined herself in her room for months. It may be the sorrow at her loss; the shame of what he did in the face of hostility from friends and neighbours. And it may be the doubt about all the things she realized she did not know about him. What is clear here, however, is that 'motherhood' was the trope Aziza exclusively drew on since the loss of her son. 'Motherhood' was also what attracted her to *Brigade de Mères and* compelled her to work on saving other women from the fate she encountered. With *Brigade de Mères,* Aziza not only felt that she was not alone, but she also felt a sense of purpose, a meaning that came out of the 'senselessness' of what happened to her child. In her work with Nadia and the other mothers, Aziza was hoping to see something meaningful coming out of her loss. As such, helping others became her 'healer.'

Reflection: Activism as a 'Healer'

Meeting other mothers experiencing the same loss changed Aziza's life and lifted her from her earlier depression. She recounted the story of a woman who did not leave her bedroom for two years after the loss of her child to ISIS. When Aziza visited this mother, they both exchanged their tragic stories, Aziza told me. 'The woman was relieved after listening to my story,' she declared with pride. 'Supporting each other in the grief we feel, was what helped us to heal,' she said. It was like a revelation to Aziza. As a mother, she believed that the pain of losing her child is inevitable and infinite. But sharing her story with others proved to her that this immense pain could be someway controlled. This woman Aziza shared her story

with, finally, left her room and started seeing a doctor, Aziza exclaimed with apparent delight. Through *Brigade de Mères*, she was introduced to many other mothers. They met regularly in what they called 'call-to-action' get-together meetings. By supporting each other, this group of women was trying to make something out of their sorrow. By working to save other children from ending with the same fate as their children, these women were able to come out of their misery and find ways to recover. Their get-togethers became a method of coping with their grief and channeling it into life-affirming actions, which drew public attention to their cause. With these activist actions, which they themselves did not identify as 'activist,' these mothers reinterpreted the traditional role of motherhood and subverted it from a restrictive label to a positive force, asserting the rights of mothers and transforming motherhood into positive and politicized force (O'Reilly, 2008; Norat, 2008). Defending her motherhood and the motherhood of others became an inspiration for Aziza's activism. Becoming politically active has changed these women's understanding of themselves as mothers as well as women, affirming in them a sense of collective power, entitlement and moral authority, which was initially employed as a 'healing' tool that provided them with strength in the face of the hostility they confronted for 'raising terrorists.'

Comparisons and Connections

The narratives recounted in this chapter display rich historical, cultural and personal details that highlight distinctive features of each woman's life story. They illustrate formative experiences of their narrators, demonstrating how particular historical connections, along with the personal experiences rooted in them, have facilitated their involvement in social and political activism. My goal in looking at these stories comparatively is not to identify one inevitable path toward a secular Muslim woman activist identity. Rather, I see in these excerpts both personal and political, a distinctive trail to each woman's sense of her journey to activism. The contributions made in this chapter lie primarily in their faithfulness to their emerging narratives. Committing to listening and paying attention to the voices of these women and to mapping the 'peaks and valleys' of their life stories makes it clear that

these stories are anything but linear processes and that even as I 'generalize' these findings, I run the risk of suggesting a falsely unifying narrative. Instead, I only indicate various connections between these five stories, as the recounting of their journeys made some similarities become apparent. Nevertheless, as reflected in the words of Clare Hemmings (2011, p. 16), 'we know that history is always more complicated than the stories we tell about it.'

In their narrative, it was apparent that the political development of these women is connected with a widely shared experience amongst them of feeling 'out of place' or 'out of time' in their surroundings and therefore of searching for a philosophy that fits more clearly with their perspectives. As noted in the reflections at the end of each story, none of these women described a single moment of revelation, rather a gradual unfolding of her 'activist' identity, often materializing as a growing awareness of societal inequalities. In their narratives, these women mentioned a prevalent sense of rebelliousness that was ever present from childhood and only through recognizing that it was not universally shared were they forced to come to terms with themselves as 'unique' from the society at large. All five women recalled an early sense of being 'different,' which, for them, became a resource for resisting certain cultural norms (Garland, 1988). Finding their voices and consciousness in response to societal contradictions, their activism was woven through their life experiences and consciousness of both privilege and oppression and was shaped by the intersectionality of their family histories, mixed cultures, social class lenses and sexuality. Activism, thus, became a useful tool and a powerful resource both for analysing and acting upon these contradictions.

In the case of Sara, her liberal upbringing and her 'activist bug,' were the basis of these feelings of difference. She described her upbringing as a 'privilege' that was not available for everyone in her community or even outside of it. Her 'activist bug' was a narrative she drew on to identify herself from other women who do not have the courage to 'stick their head out.' Henna's academic intelligence and critical thinking, traits that were not expected to be possessed by women in her society, which led to her being perceived as a 'misfit,' were later utilised as 'unique' attributes of who she perceived herself to be. Being

seen as a 'misfit' which resulted in her constant bullying helped her develop 'thick skin' that enabled her to cope with hardships and gain a great deal of resilience. Nadia's impression of being different was first felt when she was a teenager in search for freedom and it arose again in her rebelliousness against her father's traditional upbringing and her escape. Serenade noted a sense of difference more ambivalently, similar to Henna, in terms of feeling like a misfit; an 'ugly duckling.' Her analytical ability to spot societal contradictions further enhanced this feeling of uniqueness. This was least explicit in Aziza's account, although her stories about her motherhood and the narrative of sacrificing her own life for the sake of her children point toward a sense of difference. Although the experience of feeling 'different' varied among these women, all of them seemed to have drawn on them as powerful resources for withstanding normative pressures and acting upon them later in life. Perhaps these identifications contributed to a lasting feeling of essential difference (McGuire, et al., 2010).

In their narratives, these women foregrounded the interplay of their personal experiences and other social, cultural and institutional identities and contexts. Migration in their family histories has played a major role in the development of their identities. Despite their different heritages, cultures and religious backgrounds, these women's journeys to activism were deeply influenced by the societies within which they grew up. In different ways, they all described having a bit of both worlds. It was apparent in their narratives, however, that they were intentionally downplaying experiences of racism. They were all keen for me to develop an initial impression of them as women of strength, who were able to overcome all odds. In this sense, these women seemed to have been strongly aware of the dangers of telling particular personal stories (Polletta, 2006). As Nadia brought it, they chose not to appear as victims, as stories of injustice require tellers to trade agency for passivity (ibid), something none of these women seemed to desired to do. Rather, by appearing 'strong' they offered a means of challenging and countering the predominant narrative of the 'Muslim other' as simultaneously oppressed, threatening, or both, a narrative they seem to have encountered in their everyday lived experiences (Guest, 2016).

All five women referred to a series of moments that worked in conjunction with the happening of particular political events to shape their consciousness. The Rushdie Affair, for Henna, was a strong decisive moment. The events of 9/11 followed by the 7/7 London bombings were major turning points in Sara's perceptions and ideologies, crystallising her earlier misgivings. But, unlike Sara and Henna, Nadia, Serenade and Aziza often referred to a series of moments which did not necessarily work in conjunction with the general mood of particular political epochs. That is not to say that their activism was not affected by political events, but, their own personal experiences appeared to have left stronger influences. Certain events, which were personally traumatic, such as Nadia's biggest life event, her escape from a controlling father in Algeria, Serenade's major life event; the loss of her daughter's custody and Aziza's loss of her son to *jihad*, represent disjunctures, which changed their awareness. These 'decisive moments' shaped their consciousness and journeys to activism. The complexity of these choices, however, can only be partially explained by such structural perspectives.

These women also described the crucial role played by others in the development of their activist identities. Except for Nadia, their parents' driver to educate them, stemming from their own lack of formal education, brought with it a driver to seek knowledge. Sara referred to her 'privileged' education in western, multi-cultural schools, while Henna and Serenade both referred to books as significant resources that facilitated the development of their consciousness. Their relationships with their families were critical in the development of their awareness. One the one hand, Henna referred to a series of critical times in her life that, in her words, made her 'stronger and more determined.' The divorce of her parents, the relationship abuses she experienced and the lack of family support all touched her path to activism and the particular decision to take on secular activism. On the other hand, Sara's liberal upbringing and her family's and husband's support facilitated her ability to persist in the face of adversities. Nadia's upbringing by an oppressive father and spending her adolescence and early youth in a repressive society, sparked her early sense of injustice. And Serenade's love/hate relationship with her family was a major pointer in the development of her activist identity. Furthermore, each of these women encountered religious

fundamentalism in some way; Sara began her journey to activism by joining Islamist groups during her university years; Henna has been affected by the community's 'fundamentalism' which vilified her from a very early age; Serenade grew up in a Muslim-majority country where she has seen forms of violence against women and religious fundamentalism; and Aziza encountered the 'radicalism,' escape and eventually the death of her own son to ISIS.

Another theme that runs through these narratives, is the overt frustration of the disjunctions between ideals stated by their families and the community they grew up around and the lived realities of Muslim women in general. Aziza's narrative is an interesting contrast to the others. While claiming to have been raised 'like any French child,' a 'liberal' upbringing that was seen by her as different from traditions in her family's homeland, Tunisia, she selectively appreciated and identified with other aspects of her family's traditions, like marriage. That is not to say that others did not share this selectivity, rather, I point out that among the latter narratives, Aziza was the only one who did not point out any societal contradictions. Her frustration came at a later stage when she became accused of being a 'bad' mother. In this sense, Aziza's primary battle was to defend her motherhood. Nadia, who refused to abide by her father's traditional upbringing, his rules and his sternness claimed that societal contradictions between how women and men were treated was a major motivation to her actions later in life. Going back to France to find that many Muslims inhabiting the suburbs are no different from her father, perhaps even worse, brought these understandings to the fore. 'When you look at what is happening around you, you cannot help but do something.' She said. Similarly, all other women shared these same sentiments. Activism thus provided them with specific experience of agency and a constructive outlet for the emotions arousing by their recognition of various inequalities. It is clear, therefore, that both in the moments of high emotion and in the moments of stark rationality, these women activists pointed out to anger as a principal driver underlying their thinking and their actions. Coming from a variety of sources and crossing the presumed barriers of age, location, ethnic differences, education, background, lifestyles and differences in religious or political beliefs, anger was often central to their transformations from private actors to public leaders. All women described their 'activist' identity as born

out of 'anger' and 'frustration.' As Frances T. Farenthold articulated in her introduction to *Women Activists* (Garland, 1988, pp. xvii-xviii):

> Women activists find they have enough anger to sustain them over a lifetime of working for change. The anger must also be sufficient to overcome their fear in the face of harassment and ridicule ... Anger overcomes fear, a common enough experience among activists.

Drawing on the latter connections, the latter stories demonstrated that these women's arrival at this arena of activism was the outcome of a narrative evaluation of their emergent circumstances and opportunities. As such, these narratives were a product of particular cultural and historical circumstances mediated by their gendered identities (Guest, 2016; Davis, 2002). While they adapted discourses about gender, they nonetheless narrated themselves in relation to others; fathers, husbands, children and so on. This may simply reflect the material reality of women's lives as arguably characterized by relationships with others (McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2014). However, this explanation does not sit well within feminist discourses that inform this research as it tends toward gender essentialism. In terms of narrative, it could be explained by the difficulty it still is for women to narrate themselves without 'doing gender,' (Butler, 2006); for narrative to be meaningful and to acquire some degree of social authority, it must draw, to some extent, on culturally dominant discourses (McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2014). Given that these women came from all corners of the globe, there are two possible explanations for the similarity of 'doing gender' in their narrative; one is that gender is a social structure with global reach and scale (the essentialising of gender issues); the other is that transnational spaces created by globalization had an impact on the constitution of subjectivity, identity and desire (Moghadam, 2005). As such, contradictions and ambivalences in these narratives could be justified by the awareness that even as individual practices of gender have changed, traditional ideas about gender persist (McNay, 2004). Sara cherished her 'privileges' that were not available to other Muslim women despite her belief in gender equality, whereas Nadia drew on 'freedom' while admitting to have accepted 'imprisonment' for ten years and so on.

VI. NEGOTIATING COMPLEX MEANINGS IN RESPONSE TO PREVAILING NARRATIVES

To further understand the stories recounted in the previous chapter, one needs to capture the network of meanings of the narratives these women drew on within these stories. In this chapter, I focus, in particular, on how these women position themselves within broader traditions and debates. Drawing on interviews as well as documentary material, I extract sense-making coherent themes which clustered around feminism, secularism, religion and the War on Terror. Notably, these reflections and meanings do not fit neatly into dominant political and academic accounts of Muslim women. Each woman articulated precise understandings of the meanings and significance of these terms to her and employed–or rejected–them in ways she perceived as unique to her own particular location and understanding. Within the prevalent multicultural policies in Britain and the current discussions of immigration, gender and sexuality in relation to *Laïcité* in France, the women whose stories are recounted here are locked in a narrow range of roles and positions, which are widely misunderstood by different groups. They feel 'alone' in carrying the values of secularism while appreciating their unique histories that are, in one way or another, connected to Islam, which seems contradictory to many. The chapter uncovers the complex narratives these women are negotiating, in response to mainstream narratives. The prevailing narratives as having been revealed in the literature review, are simplistic and polarized, which makes it difficult for them to align with any fixed category. These narratives, which were prompted as responses to various questions I asked in our interviews, revolved around several topics. The first topic looks at their understandings of feminism and their attempts to counter mainstream narratives about Muslim women. The second topic focuses on their understandings of the concept of secularism and the questions of whether it is relevant to Islam. This leads to the narratives of their battle against both religious fundamentalism and Islamophobia. The chapter aims to clarify the particular standpoints of these women; ones that articulate a Muslim identity and at the same time claim a commitment to secularism and human rights.

'I Refuse to be Labelled'

Refusing to be labelled was a theme running through the narratives of the women activists I interviewed. As 'multi-cultured,' 'transnational' women, they grew up around complex combinations, which made it difficult for them to ally with one particular group or conform to one definite category. Being born in one culture and simultaneously exposed to multiple others; both ethnic and religious, allowed these women to adopt ideologies and lifestyles that were often perceived by others as 'contradictory.' In Britain, as explained in the previous chapter, the symbolic event of The *Satanic Verses*, which highlighted the tensions between religion and secularism heightened and intensified various emotional reactions. At that time, young women like Sara and Henna were faced with making choices about who they are and their place within British society. Each experimented in a different direction, yet both ended up adopting what their Muslim societies, as well as some westerns, perceived as contradictory; 'being Muslim and secular, is seen by many as an oxymoron,' Sara told me. In France, the earlier tension between state and religion revived by the establishment of Islam was often presented as incompatible with *Laïcité* (Lassalle, 2011). This appeared, among other issues, in the disputes over the wearing of Islamic headscarves in schools that began in 1989. In their narratives, all three women activists whose stories are recounted here, unlike Sara and Henna who experimented with different paths, adopted a clear path early on during their adolescence, that rejected the patriarchal traditions of their parents' homeland and embraced and supported an 'idealised' model of the Republic. Nonetheless, they did not refute Islam as a facet of their 'cultural' identity. This has made it even more difficult for them to identify with any particular group.

Within Muslim societies at large, the two generalized philosophies at crossroads seem to be Islamic feminism and secular feminism (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2008, p. 101). Islamic feminism tends to be viewed by some as an oxymoron (Moghissi, 1999), while others see secular feminism as problematic (El Guindi, 1999). All women interviewed in this thesis refused to identify with either of these philosophies. Further, the chain of events–starting with the Rushdie Affair in 1989, the 9/11 attacks, the 7/7 London bombings, the Charlie

Hebdo, until the surfacing of new threats posed by the 'jihadist foreign fighters' indoctrinated and radicalized by groups like ISIS, has made it even harder for them to agree to be defined by particular frames, fearing that these ideological battles weaken the weight of their activism. Labelled as inauthentic' by some and as 'native informants' by others, these women feel forced by many opposing groups to demonstrate whether they qualify as 'good Muslims' or 'bad Muslims.' In her book, Sara wrote that the earlier idea of a clash of civilizations, between Islam and the West, has now been replaced by clashes within Islam 'pitting Muslims against each other with competing claims of what values and principles the faith stands for,' believing that the consequence of this 'bitter conflict' will impact the lives of 'all of us,' and future generations (Khan & McMahon, 2016). The so-called 'War on Terror,' which has created new meanings of race, gender and religion became either a driving force or a restraint to their political engagements and standpoints. These women see themselves as representing a genre of 'Muslim' women committed to the feminist goals of combating patriarchy and transforming the oppressive ideological and material conditions that sustain the subordination of women, yet do not see this, like some, as inherently inconsistent with Islam.

Despite their experiences of racism and socio-economic marginalisation, exemplified in their youth years' stories revolving around their Muslim communities with little reference to the West, these women remained firm supporters of the Europe of Liberty, Equality and Democracy, avoiding the realities of social abandonment and racial inequality and instead shifting their focus by maintaining that they never allowed racism to define them. Sara, a proud 'British' as she always voiced in our interviews, admitted to having experienced racism, like being called a 'Paki' by her colleagues in school, but 'never allowed that to define me … I never chose to make myself a victim,' she asserted. Similarly, defending her beloved France, Nadia recounted that 'racism is not just in France … It is not about French people … It is universal.' Similarly, Serenade told me 'we cannot accuse a state of being racist because of the actions of one police officer.' Being 'keenly aware of the dangers of telling personal stories,' and that 'representing oneself as a victim cannot but diminish one's capacity for action' (Polletta, 2006, p. 40), may have been the driver behind

downplaying experiences of racism. In the face of fear of hostility, these women are sometimes forced to play hide and seek with their identity, strategising when to show parts and when it is essential to hide other parts (ibid). In comparison to their parents' apparent strong attachment toward culture and religion, for example, these women painted a different picture. They claimed to have grown up with a sort of strength and confidence, not based on their parents' strong cultural identity per se but of individuals who grew up to voice their opinions. Being aware of their rights as citizens of European countries, gave them a sense of privilege to their counterparts in Muslim majority countries. Sara, for example, told me:

> In one sense there is definitely a solidarity there because there's a common issue, there's a common thing about protecting women's rights, but at the same time, I know that I can't compare myself to those incredible women whom I look up to in the Middle East or in South Asian countries. Because I live in a country that has said domestic violence is illegal, I live in a country where there is the equalities act, the human rights act and those women don't have that; where domestic violence is still legal in many countries, where women are struggling to become parliamentarians for example, where FGM is rampant in places like Egypt, where sexual abuse and harassment of women is like 95 per cent or whatever, it's very high. And it is like, I know that there are challenges here, but I cannot compare! I feel so privileged.

All other women spoke in similar reflective ways, seeing themselves as 'privileged' for being born or having lived in western democracies. They perceive their identities as fluid and ruptured through a synthesis of ethnic cultures, Islam and western cultures. These women form a part of what Haw (2010) describes as an 'in-between' generation who visibly mark a moment within European society in terms of possessing western citizenship, being woman, being Muslim and being secular. Unlike the generation that asserted the visibility of Muslim identity, in the form of the headscarf, or the ones who completely renounced Islam, like Ayaan Hirsi Ali, these women constitute different 'inbetweeners.' They reconstructed and reintegrated their ethnic upbringing and their idealism of western values of liberty, tolerance, freedom and democracy and criticized some religious practices–that

include the headscarf—while at the same time refused to completely denounce Islam. Their identity as they perceived it is in equal parts being a woman, secular, Muslim, mother and activist. As described earlier, narratives are subjective evaluations and interpretations of circumstances and events (Holstein, 2000). In this sense, these women's narratives occupied the intersections between structure, namely the 'War on Terror,' and agency, represented in their own interpretations and re-appropriations of culturally available discourses. As such, their choice of not aligning with any particular dominant narrative denotes 'agency conditioned by context' (Polletta, 2006).

I Reject the Narratives of the 'Oppressed Muslim Woman'

With the rise of political Islam; *hijab*, polygamy, forced marriages, female genital mutilation and the sexual victimisation of young Muslim women have received much attention from the western media. The figure of a victimised and manipulated woman has appeared regularly in national conversations about Muslim societies in the west and their integration within western societies (Raissiguier, 2008; Abu-Lughod, 2013). In Britain, for example, Sara criticized the government for excluding Muslim women from policymaking, emphasising that the dominant perceptions that all Pakistani women are 'obedient and submissive' are far from reality, recounting how one woman back in the 1980s, one of her mother's friends, galvanised many other women. She believed that some women have 'got it in them' to speak for others. Not only Sara, but all the women I interviewed claimed to have rejected the control over them by their traditional communities, countering the dominant narratives of the helpless Muslim woman. In their narratives, they articulated that by their activism, they anticipated to show their societies their refusal to be victims. They portrayed themselves as tough women, who are not only able to liberate themselves from the 'imagined' traditional role of a 'Muslim woman,' but also able to help 'liberate' other women. They all asserted that many women are, in fact, stronger, more resilient than men and deserve to be heard, countering the narratives of the 'voiceless' Muslim woman. They expressed immense 'anger' that Muslim women's voices are less heard both in the media

and by policymakers and they all agreed that for a genuine change to occur, there's a dire need to engage with Muslim women. In our interview Sara told me:

> Women have always had more balls than men. I swear to God, this thing about 'Oh women are the weaker sect! … we have gotten far more balls than you guys have. You know we are the strongest sect; we are the one that gives birth and we are the ones that will fight the extremists … Women are the ones everyone should invest in because we are the ones prepared to speak the truth and won't care what you say. We will take it!

All women activists interviewed in this thesis asserted that Muslim women do not constitute one category. They asserted that Muslim women's emancipation should not be used as a way to divert attention from the overall patriarchal system that oppresses every woman, both Muslim and western and whose emancipation is far from being a given. Their capacity for action, they said, was not only due to the various privileges they mentioned earlier but also due to their own belief in their abilities to examine their situation critically; their emotional commitment to women's issues; and their confidence in their ability to take action. In the latter quote, Sara made clear her refusal to be unheard or undermined. Most women activists interviewed in this thesis showed similar sentiments; they refused to be victimised by others, demonstrating through their narrative, that the prevailing negative perceptions of Muslim women as victims became a mobilising factor to demonstrate that their homogenisation in one category is misleading. Believing that the issue of gender equality will always be controversial not only among Muslim but even within western societies, these women claimed to be ready to roll up their sleeves and fight for equality and recognition in attempts to counter prevailing stereotypes.

Despite that they see themselves as strong and empowered, women like Sara, Henna, Nadia and Serenade, were 'acutely' aware of the gender discrimination within their communities and that not all Muslim women are 'empowered,' in fact, not all women are empowered. Except for Aziza, my interviews with these women revealed that their top priority was to battle for women's rights within their societies. All of them, whether they had a liberal upbringing or traditional, claimed to have seen, first-hand, the supposed evils

visited upon Muslim women. For that, they believed to be ideally suited to speak on behalf of those who are silenced. In one of our interviews, Henna told me that throughout the early days of her professional life, she was constantly told, by men, that she must be put back in her place 'as a woman.' Constantly hearing such narratives made her learn how important it was to prioritize women's issues. In her writings, Sara frequently raised concerns about the ways in which some women are treated within Muslim societies in Britain, stressing that she would not tolerate or have patience with such gender injustice; 'to do so would be an act of injustice on my part,' she wrote. And as a result of her close involvement with the grassroots, Nadia was able to see and hear 'many shocking stories' of Muslim women's experiences in the *banlieues* and realize the neglect of their situation by public institutions. As such and based on values of self-definition and autonomy, she along with Serenade and Aziza encouraged women to repossess the public space to show positive representations of women in the *banlieues* and to counter the mainstream narrative of the 'subjugated' Muslim woman.

Yet Refuse to Ally with a Particular 'Feminism'

Even though questioning and challenging male domination within Muslim societies continued to be a central theme in the narratives of these women, they did not all identify as 'feminist,' or 'Islamic feminist' or even 'secular feminist.' Regarding 'feminism' with scepticism by many Muslim women seemed to have originated from two issues. The first is that within Muslim majority societies, the early onset of feminism was directly influenced by western feminism and thus was seen by some as 'an illegal immigrant and an alien import' (Golley, 2004, p. 521). The second is that western feminism, at large, has not only ignored women's movements in the postcolonial world but has also assumed commonality and sameness in the forms of women's oppression and activism worldwide (Basu, 1995). 'It is even argued that western feminists have described Arab women's lives as being so different from theirs that they cannot possibly develop any kind of feminism' (ibid, p. 522). Until present, the issue of whether 'feminism' is relevant to Muslim women continues to be

debated, with questions over whether women's status and rights are compatible or not with the principles of the Islamic *Shari'a* (Moghissi, 1999, p. 127).

In the last few decades, however, the understanding of intersectionality which recognizes that multiple grounds of discrimination and oppression shape different realities, which has grown out of Black and postcolonial feminist theories over the past few decades, shifted the single focus on western women to a multiplicity of directions. Minorities' liberation movements dealing with race and class have opened discussions on the limitations of mainstream feminism which has sometimes ignored the realities of complications faced by minority women. Nevertheless, full-fledged dialogue between mainstream western feminism and various minority-led feminisms to include all experiences of womanhood and open a path to emancipation for all woman is not yet realized. This makes it difficult for many women, not only the ones whose stories are recounted here, to align with one particular feminism. As such, most of the women I interviewed chose not to identify as feminist. Sara and Serenade, on the one hand, did not completely refuse the label in its broad significance, yet, did not fully agree that any of the existing feminist discourses would necessarily better women's position. Serenade, instead, argued that Muslim women, like women of other faiths and backgrounds, need to be viewed within their own historical, social and ideological contexts. In her words, she said, 'we need to adopt a specific position when it comes to women's rights and secularism … a position that avoids both essentialism and cultural relativism,' yet she struggled to find a specific word to describe her position. Nadia, on the other hand, refused to position herself within any single classification in relation to feminism. Notoriously, second wave French feminism has been 'Parisian, middle-class … excluding the needs of working-class women and women from immigrant background' (Fayard & Rocheron, 2009). Perceiving herself as one of the grassroots, Nadia strongly dissociated herself with French feminism, saying, 'I am not a feminist … I defend everybody, men, women, whatever … I stay away from ideologies of those intellectuals; I am a free soul.' In their narrative, both Nadia and Aziza strongly argued that these labels are abused by intellectuals and politicians to claim authority over them as 'marginalised women.'

By critiquing hegemonic forms of feminism, these women appropriated the particularity of what gender equality meant to them within their own contexts and locations. And while rejecting the label 'feminist,' they argued that battling for women's rights does not necessarily align with one particular agenda. Including Sara and Serenade who did not completely reject the term, these women refused to be framed within one single feminist discourse and affirmed that while seeking to empower women, they are resolute in distancing themselves from philosophies they described as 'problematic.' As Muslim women who are passionate about the rights of all women, yet dissociate with western feminist discourses, Sara offered a clarification, saying that she found it disappointing that they undermine the rights of Muslim women whether in choosing to become a Muslim or else. She continued saying 'I have seen feminists describe Islam as "a misogynistic faith" and "illogical superstition," which can only be described as patronizing and insulting to Muslim feminists across the world who are actively campaigning for the rights of women.' In these women's perspective, the universalism versus cultural relativism debate that continues to craze all around the world needs to change. They all agreed that the challenges facing Muslim women need to be re-appropriated within the context of Muslim women. That is not to say that all Muslim women are situated within the same context. To the contrary, they were all explicit in refusing to essentialise women in general and Muslim women in particular.

It is obvious from their narrative that these women were having difficulty expressing and articulating their positions regarding feminism at large. This refusal and 'silence' in declaring a particular position is an important aspect of their narrative. While we might not be free to tell any story, it is important to recognize that we are still the authors of our own narrative (Woodiwiss, et al., 2017, p. 21). We are all constrained by the stories in circulation at any given time, but we use them, not as readymade scripts, but as frameworks that help us to construct our own (ibid). In telling their stories, these women picked and chose among the plots and subplots of different narratives to construct a story that works for them. In this sense, the difficulty they expressed in articulating a particular position within available discourses reveals their attempts at constructing their own narrative; one that builds on

existing ones, like feminism, yet does not fully agree with a particular sub-category. These seemingly contradictive narratives should not be seen as untrue but rather as a reflection of the various and multi-layered explanations for using such narratives and their constraints in telling them. In their endeavours to construct a counter-narrative, these women built on existing ones, adding, or subtracting from them in attempts to articulate their own positions.

The '*Hijab*' Debate

In Britain, France and across western Europe, the rise of political Islam sparked heated debate and indignation over issues related to gender equality. Here, I focus on the subject of Muslim women dress in general and the *hijab* (headscarf), in particular, which served as a visible marker of ethnic identity a few decades ago and 'Islamic identity' at present (Orenstein & Weismann, 2016). The emergence of 'overt Islamophobia' as a result of the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent 'War on Terror' often fixated on the bodies of Muslim women (Zine, 2006). Within this highly charged controversy, the veil was constructed as a signifier of the pervasive 'Islamic threat' (ibid). British and French governments reacted differently to the increasing donning of the *hijab* among women. France was the most extreme in prohibiting veiling in state schools (Lassalle, 2011), while Britain has been 'permissive, imposing no ban whatsoever on female covering in public' (Orenstein & Weismann, 2016, p. 387). Yet, in both countries, the issue has been extremely contested. According to 2010 and 2011 polls, most Britons would have liked to see the veil banned (ibid). In France, the controversy surrounding what they call '*L'affair du Foulard*' (The Headscarf Affair), mainly focused on the inability of certain immigrants to 'melt' into French society (Raissiguier, 2008). In fact, the headscarf controversy and its ripples 'established Islam as one of the main roadblocks to the successful integration of postcolonial immigrants in France (ibid). In March 2004, a law was passed to forbid any displays of religious belonging in state schools (ibid). And even in Britain, 'foreign secretary Jack Straw's statement in October 2006 that women had to remove the *niqab* when visiting his 'advice surgery' resonated with many in the majority society' (Orenstein & Weismann, 2016). This enraged Muslims and human rights groups all over Britain.

Faith-based and secular feminists often collide over politically charged issues such as veiling. Many secular feminists view *hijab* as an undeniable example of religious fundamentalism and patriarchal oppression and largely dismiss the views of Muslim women who choose to wear it (El Saadawi, 1997; Ali, 2006). And some faith-based feminists view it not only as an inviolable religious tradition but also as a sign of 'agency,' 'modesty' and 'resistance' (Guénif-Souilamas, 2006). In the middle, Muslim feminists such as Leila Ahmed and Amina Wadud do not consider *hijab* to be a religious requirement, yet support the civil liberties of Muslim women in Europe who are denied the choice to adopt this particular style of dress in schools and other public institutions, without necessarily seeing this support as a submission to patriarchy and fundamentalism, but rather as an assertion of women's 'agency' over the representation of their bodies[87]. The women whose stories are recounted in this thesis have a slightly different view of the veil. They neither adopted views that equate *hijab* to seclusion and constraints on women's participation in public life hence inherently oppressive, nor they used apologetic tones in asserting that it is not a religious requirement, or that it is an absolute sign of 'agency.' They unapologetically regarded the veil as the embodiment of discrimination against women in society, yet they differed in their approaches to those of earlier secularists like Fadela Amara who aligns herself with the dominant line of argument supporting the call for a complete banning of the headscarf, or Mariam Namazie, a British-Iranian secularist and human rights activist, who proposes a ban at least on wearing the *burqa'* (face cover), which she described as 'no different from living in a "mobile prison," a tomb or a rubbish bag' (Orenstein & Weismann, 2016). In contrast to these views, Sara expressed an objection to a ban, which in her view might prove self-defeating. Like Leila Ahmed and Amina Wadud, she did not consider *hijab* to be a religious requirement; she argued that it is a result of 'the arrival of political Islam.' However, she openly criticized the fixation of western media on the issue. In an article for *The Guardian*, she made no attempt to hide her frustration as she criticized the prevailing perceptions of

87. See Chapter 2 of this thesis.

Muslim women, which, for her, are manifested in the media's preoccupation with the *hijab*[88]. In an article for *The Telegraph*, she wrote:

> As France finds itself in the grip of emergency law brought about by the numerous Islamist-inspired terror attacks that have plagued the country in recent times, you would think the authorities would have more pressing concerns on their mind than the burkini, which as many have pointed out is really not dissimilar to a wetsuit[89].

In my interview with Nadia, she expressed similar views to those of Sara, albeit she presented them differently. In her narrative, unlike Sara who articulated her views on the headscarf within a human rights discourse, Nadia argued that the *hijab* is not a free choice *per se*, but may be a result of social pressures. She agreed with Sara in her frustration over the obsession with Muslim women's bodies, saying that 'rather than making war against the jihadists as they continue to claim, they seem to have made war against Muslim women.' However, she argued that what she thinks is particularly overlooked is the sense of *hijab* as an adaptation to secularised public spaces, as a form of dress that conjugates religious practice with public life and makes 'everyday' socialising and mixing possible. The *burqini*, for example, she continued, allows Muslim women to enjoy swimming in public pools and open water, enabling them to divert a gaze that might otherwise objectify and sexualise their bodies. In our interview, she said:

> The problem is not a woman who is wearing a *burqini* and wants to go to the beach, the problem is who has put in her mind that this is the true religion, who has put in her mind that, in a country like France, the country of freedom, this is what she needs to do? Does she think this is her freedom? We have to understand that some of these women would only wear this *burqini* because her husband forced her. If she did not wear it, he will not allow her to go to the beach. What would she do! It is her only entertainment!

Similarly, Serenade maintained that a woman should have the right to wear any dress she chooses, best on her belief in the French ideals of 'freedom.' As a social worker

88. https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2011/apr/29/muslim-women-fighting-islamic-extremism
89. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/life/forcing-a-burkini-clad-woman-to-strip-on-the-beach-violates-her/

who focused on marriage issues and abortion, she wondered why women in France were allowed to express their opinions about abortion and contraception yet Muslim women are not allowed to voice their opinion 'about a garment?' While agreeing with Nadia that *hijab* has become a sign of social pressures due to the rise of political Islam, she pointed out that not every woman who wears it holds Islamist values. In her opinion, the perception founded on the notions that Muslim ways of life are incompatible with western modernity ignores the various practices of dress that Muslims adopt. No one seems to notice, for example, that the *hijab*, as a headscarf, can be combined with western forms of dress and can be worn fashionably, piously, playfully and creatively, Serenade asserted. However, for these women, issues such as the *hijab* cannot be separated from issues that perceive Islam as a monolithic religion, or secularism as a western concept that cannot be reconciled with Islam. The problem as has been articulated very early on in this thesis is that debates around the Islamic revival and about the Islamic veil in specific, continue to depend on a series of oppositions between 'choice and constraint, personal autonomy and religious authority and self-realization and "external" norms' (Fernando, 2010, p. 20).

I Reject the Idea of a 'Monolithic Islam'

What I have demonstrated up to this point is that these women are committed to the battle for Muslim women's rights. This commitment is heightened by their personal experiences of gender disparity and the witnessing of these inequalities within their Muslim societies in relation to the western contexts they inhabit, yet, being feminist represented different connotations to them. Similarly, being 'Muslim' signified different understandings to them. Mainstream academic literature and media use the word 'Islam' or 'Muslim' in a monolithic manner that implies internal homogeneity. However, the Islamic faith is subject to multiple interpretations, with multiple types of Muslims who practise Islam based on their ideological interpretations, sect, ethnicity and gender. In this section, I demonstrate that while all women I interviewed make explicit reference to Islam as a vital part of their identity, they asserted that their understanding of it is unique to them and does not

necessarily reflect any mainstream representation of Islam. Sara, for example, asserted that she does not believe in the existence of a single unified image of a 'Muslim' or a 'Muslim' woman. In our interview, she deliberated on what some referred to as the 'authentic' Muslim or the 'good' Muslim which she believed to be an imaginary frame. She affirmed that just like there is no one unified image of Christianity, there is no one unified image of Islam, asserting that the Muslim community is diverse, unpredictable and far more complicated than simply calling it 'the Muslim community.' In her words, she told me:

> I do not think there is one monolithic Islam. I think there are many *Islams*. There are patriarchal interpretations of the religion and there are egalitarian interpretations of it. You can argue Islam is a religion of peace and you can also argue it is a religion of violence … I think that is the thing with religion. I do not think it is unique to Islam; it is the way all religions are. And if you can have a dominant interpretation of Islam that is egalitarian and advocates for human rights as ccontextualized for the 21st century … that should be the way forward.

In our interview, Sara identified herself as Muslim, a 'progressive Muslim' who supports human rights and refuses fundamentalist interpretations of Islam. Similarly, Henna, Aziza and Serenade identified as 'Muslim.' Like Sara, Nadia referred to a version of Islam that is 'her own.' She stressed that she was never 'religious' even though she believes in God. She criticized the version of Islam that groups like ISIS promote, stressing that it is a commercialised version of Islam that intensifies politicisation, militarisation and polarization. Emphasising her apolitical stance towards religion, Nadia proclaimed that her Islam 'is a religion of peace and love.' According to Nadia, religion and customs make up an intricate web that is difficult to disentangle. There is no such thing as 'the authentic Muslim woman,' with a particular dress code or a particular behaviour, she continued. Similarly, Sara stressed that *Shari'a* has more than one interpretation and that 'being Muslim does not necessarily translate into a headcover, for example.' These women did not swear off all religious practices in their personal lives, yet they objected to the imposition of these practices by whom they called 'fundamental' Muslims. They stated that their religious observance relates to cultural traditions and customs stemming from their unique

backgrounds. Fasting during the month of Ramadan as Henna articulated is especially perceived as a way of engaging in a collective activity, describing Ramadan, *Jum'ah* (Friday prayer), *Bairam*, etc, as 'cultural events,' rather than religious practices. Nadia emphasised that she celebrates Muslim feasts, just like she celebrates Christmas, Easter and other religious-based events. Like 'secular Jews,' who choose to identify as Jewish despite being non-practising, agnostic, or even atheist, because they see Judaism as a culture or ethnicity and not just as a religion[90], the women I interviewed perceived Islam as a cultural identity rather than a religious one.

Stressing their apolitical stance towards Islam, the women I interviewed were not interested in discussing their faith. Similar to all women I interviewed, Sara told me that, for her, 'religion is intimate and private,' and does not necessarily reflect political ideologies. Yet, when they address Islamic Fundamentalists, they, strategically deploy an Islamic feminist approach that utilises Muslim feminists' reinterpretations of Islamic theology as a counter-narrative to 'challenge rigid ideas' spread by those they consider radical Muslims. In our interview, Henna explained that the possibility of discovering rigid or flexible interpretations to the same text 'does not just exist, but has existed since the dawn of Islam.' Similarly, Sara pointed to scholars like Ziba Mir-Hosseini and Amina Wadud as leaders of a 'movement out there' trying to 'reconcile egalitarian Islamic jurisprudence with human rights laws,' yet, she was cautious no to identify as part of it. Instead, she simply said 'I support this kind of work.'

Unlike Sara and Henna, who did not mind using Islamic texts to achieve equality and women's rights, Nadia, Aziza and Serenade refused to do so, fearing the risk of having to submit to a strenuous debate with fundamentalists regarding which interpretations are valid. For them, using an Islamic feminist discourse may put women's rights in jeopardy and silence the voices of women who rely on interpretations that are not approved by the rising popularity of religious fundamentalists. Unlike their British counterparts who displayed a mixed activist identity that included being Muslim and did not mind employing

90. See https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/04/italy-secular-muslims/523644/

a counter-narrative based on theology, French Muslim women activists clearly articulated a view that Islam should not interfere in politics and clearly identified their 'Islam' as a cultural rather than a religious identity. The different conceptions about the role of religion in Britain and France, have contributed to the development of the two countries different relationships to Islam and correspondingly to the narratives of these women. Historically, the French has allowed access to French citizenship, but only for immigrants who have been willing to assimilate by speaking the language and accepting the French concepts of *Laïcité* (Pojmann, 2006), which made it more difficult for women who desired to integrate to refuse the French secular model which does not acknowledge any sign of religion in the public sphere. While in Britain, concepts of multiculturalism were accompanied by the recognition of particular cultural and ethnic identities (Modood, 2007), which allowed the display of religious and cultural symbols in the public space, made it easier for women like Sara and Henna to articulate an acceptance of Islam as entwined in their identity and activism. Yet, a clear similarity between both was the argument that counters the fundamentalist one, that is; there is no one Islam, but many. There are plenty of variations of lived belief among people who define themselves as Muslim, just as there are among those who describe themselves as Christian, or Buddhist, or Hindu.

I Construct My Own 'Secularism'

The ongoing controversies around the rise in Islamist militancy, the veil, the repression of women and more have now become permanent fixtures of British and French media. With multiculturalism aiming at maintaining the distinctive identities of different cultural, ethnic and religious groups and *Laïcité* strictly maintaining the confining of any religious practice to the private sphere, the result in both countries was the 'segregation of ethnically and religiously based Muslim communities, along with their homogenisation in the mind of the host society' (Orenstein & Weismann, 2016, p. 379). Both the academic scholarship and the media have given much attention to those who display those stereotypes, leaving out any differing categories, one of which are secular Muslims. All the women I interviewed see

themselves as 'secular.' Whereas Sara, Henna and Serenade had very precise explanations of what the term entails to them, Nadia and Aziza's understanding of the term was more fluid and elusive. Putting differences aside, all were united in their opposition to Islamic fundamentalism, the implementation of *Shari'a* laws and the 'imposition' of any dress code. They also shared the sense that religion should not be conflated with politics. And they all did not see a contradiction in holding both identities; Muslim and Secular. They believed that religion should not constitute the only source of values and axis of orientation in people's lives. Sara, for example, addressed religious observance as a 'private' feature of everyday life, which may, or may not represent one aspect of a woman's life. Her position was that it is important that the community, in its wide sense, establishes a 'way of life' that exists outside of religious beliefs, i.e. schooling, relationships, patriarchy, etc. Nadia, on the other hand, saw it as a cultural aspect of her life. None of these women, however, took a public position in the debates of the meanings of 'secular' versus 'religious,' preferring, instead, to focus on their activism rather than be side-tracked in intellectual and philosophical circles. As an ex-Muslim, Tehmina Kazi explained to *Faith in Feminism,* that her understanding of the term 'secularism,' which did not contradict with the understandings of the rest of the women I interviewed is:

> Put simply ... an approach to Islam that believes faith and government are two separate spheres; that the political leadership should not be religious, but secular and democratic. ... On a personal level, one can be a secular Muslim and still pray five times a day, sport a headscarf or beard and fast during Ramadan, or any combination of the above. What sets secular Muslims apart is their unyielding commitment to equality and universal human rights, even when these may conflict with certain traditions that purport to be religiously inspired[91].

While British women activists I interviewed were clear in articulating their understandings of the term 'secularism,' French women activists were more fluid in describing a particular definition, preferring instead to follow the Republic's definition of

91. See http://faithinfeminism.com/secular-muslims-womens-rights/?doing_wp_cron=1536840804.1862609386444091796875

Laïcité, a core value of French identity, aiming at fostering a post-religious society and broadly referring to the 'freedom' of citizens and of public institutions 'from' the influence of organized religion. For these women, the term simply meant 'freedom.' Serenade emphasised that she is not against religion, because 'we live in a state that gives freedom to all its citizens; freedom to believe whatever they wish to believe; freedom to belong to any faith.' Similarly, Nadia explained that her main activist goal was to be 'free;' 'I do what I do to be free and for others to be free.' She argued that being a citizen of a secular country like France, in and of itself and enjoying the luxuries of 'freedom,' should compel people to reconsider the very definition of the word freedom. In her words:

> I hear people say France is a secular country which for them means "we do whatever we wish to do." Some others say "no, you can't do what you wish to do" … Everybody says "secular" … They are mixing everything just like scrambled eggs … Secularism should give you justice. Secular can be secular and Muslim, you can also be secular and a Catholic, you can be secular and a Jew … They do not understand this; they think secular means you have no religion. … My secularism means each has their own beliefs; my belief is not being veiled, maybe yours is wearing the veil. That is ok!

On one note, the latter understandings of the term 'freedom' are, in reality, different from what French *Laïcité* actually refers to. Whereas in Britain, at least in theory, multicultural politics allow the freedom 'to' assert religious beliefs and make demands for religious recognition, French *Laïcité* asserts the need to safeguard people's freedom 'from' religion. The understanding of the term 'freedom' in the French constitution casts it as a simple issue of liberation from constraints (Valdez, 2016). This is paradoxical given these women's commitment to the Republican value and misunderstandings of what 'freedom' entails within the French constitution. This commitment, as Kiran Grewal explains 'may not serve the desired purpose' (Grewal, 2017, p. 194). As discussed in chapter II, the 'Republican myths of freedom, equality and solidarity have historically been used as a means of justifying incredible state violence both within the Hexagon and throughout France's colonial empire' (ibid). Yet, these women tend continue to romanticize them by blindly defending the Republican principles.

On another note, despite that they all self-identify as secular, these women constantly asserted their refusal to be 'entrapped' within a particular agenda. They all wished to be integrated into what they perceive as 'the open, liberal western society.' Yet, as they were all brought up in environments with different degrees of religious observance; some adhered to Islam as a religion; some perceived it as a cultural identity rather than a religious one; some believed in the importance of reinterpreting religious texts, and; some rejected the idea of working within religious frameworks. In the general sense, secular-oriented ideology is the separation between religion and politics, yet it does not necessarily denote anti-religious or anti-Islamic positions. Scholarly literature that describes secular Muslims refers to civil laws and human rights conventions, rather than *Shari'a,* as their frames of reference (Orenstein & Weismann, 2016). This definition has found resonance among the women I interviewed. Nonetheless, it is a definition that might gloss over the heterogeneity of understandings and manifestations of secularism of these women. It 'also fails to analyse the continuum between religious and secular beliefs and practices in women's everyday lives' (Al-Ali, 2000, p. 130).

For many Westerners, a widespread argument is that there is a natural and inherent link between Christianity and secularism, understood as the separation of state and Church (Keddie, 1997, p. 24). In Muslim contexts, the interpretation of the term was related to a complex history of Nationalism and modernism in relation to colonial and postcolonial experiences and focused on Nationalist centralising governments. With the rise of political Islam, 'secularism' was given a new meaning by its proponents who perceive it as 'un-Islamic,' 'anti-Islamic' and 'non-Islamic' (Badran, 2009), putting self-proclaimed secular Muslims on guard. Some westerns, on the other hand, accused them of 'attempting to create a community where there isn't any,' maintaining that 'they are unconsciously constructing counter communitarianism founded on the ethnicising and culturalising of the reference to Islam (Mas, 2006, p. 586). As have been articulated, each of the women I interviewed held a 'secular' attitude that reflected her political struggles and everyday life. The boundaries between the definitions of secular versus Muslim was not a clear-cut description

in their narratives. What was clear, however, was that they find no contradiction between being secular and being Muslim. In fact, Sara told me:

> There has a very common perception that … being Muslim, or being of faith and being secular is almost like a contradiction, it is like an oxymoron; you cannot be both … And I just think that is ludicrous actually… there is a lot of secularist Muslims out there who do not openly say it … I think it is just a misnomer. It is what the fundamentalists want us to believe, the literalists want us to believe, the puritanical want us to believe! I do not see why you can't be somebody who is a Muslim, who chooses to be a Muslim, who feels Islam as part of their identity and fundamentally believe in a secular outlook, belief in the separation of politics, State and the Mosque, or state and the Church … I suppose a lot of people do not understand that the core of secularism is about giving people the right to practice their religion, it is not about favoring one religion over the other.

The trouble with concepts like 'secularism' is that we think we understand them too well. We may define them in different ways, assume different political or moral positions in relation to them, but they seem natural to us. To define the secular perspective as simply 'non-religious' is to miss the great power of women like the ones whose stories are recounted in this thesis, who despite not being engaged in theological arguments, base their activism within a standpoint that is concerned with the cultural and political effect that religions exert upon social acts. These women's position is not of a cultural relativist or an apologist. It does not celebrate the wearing of the *hijab* as a form of 'empowerment,' neither does it strongly condemn its forcible removal. This argument is supported by Homi Bhabha, who 'countered claims that secularism is an alien concept for minority communities' (Dhaliwal & Yuval-Davis, 2014, p. 15). Differences aside, these women firmly believed in grounding their discourse outside the realm of any religion, whether Muslim or Christian. As Azza Karam (1998, p. 13) states, 'they do not 'waste their time' attempting to harmonise religious discourses with the concept and declarations pertinent to human rights.' By so doing, they avoid being caught up in interminable debates on the position of women within religion (ibid). Their position is not Islamophobic, it is secular and anti-fundamentalist, yet, given

the heated nature of these issues, it seems convenient for some to nurture the misperceptions.

AND CHALLENGE BOTH ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM AND CULTURAL RELATIVISM

Thus far, it is clear that these women profoundly believed that women would pay a high price if Islamists were to succeed in their demands. They all agreed on this particular political struggle as a shared goal. But they did not necessarily see, as some others did, that the battle for women's rights is antithetical to Islam. They distinguished between Islam and Islamism and (religious extremism) and asserted that Islamists distort religious teachings as a way to gain power and authority. The main features of religious fundamentalism in these women's narratives were that; Fundamentalists claim their version of Islam to be the only true one, and; they use political means to impose their version of the truth to all members of a religion. They also agreed that women, their roles and their control is at the heart of the fundamentalist agenda. The effect of fundamentalist movements has been detrimental to women, 'limiting and defining their roles and activities and actively oppressing them when they step out of the preordained limits of their designated roles (Dhaliwal & Yuval-Davis, 2014, p. 15). In our interview, Serenade argued that 'political Islam has a specific discourse against women's rights and against women's bodies.' Likely, Sara situated women's issues in direct confrontation with Islamism. In one of our interviews, she told me:

> Challenging religious fundamentalism is really important … The impact that it has on women's rights is clearly the case we have seen in many Muslim countries. But also, in this country, you know, because of the rise of religious fundamentalism we have seen a rise of *Shari'a* councils. We are seeing fundamentalists trying to restrict some practices on girls in schools and in universities, encouraging the idea of modesty clothing, dictating what women can and cannot do. There are preachers in this country going around saying that the role of women is in the home, they should not work, they will not condemn domestic violence and they would promote the narratives of gender inequality. So, for us, we see a

clear correlation between the rise of religious fundamentalism and the denigration that happened to women's rights.

Henna, Nadia and Aziza revealed similar views that women are primary targets of Islamism, being instrumentalized as the guardians of identity in both Islamist and postcolonial Nationalist movements. Nadia recounted how Islamists in Algeria were preoccupied with the control of women's behaviour, a control that is similar to the control that recent radical movements associated with groups such as ISIS were trying to exert on women, not only in Muslim countries but also in Europe. She said she was very pessimistic about the future of the Republic seeing girls she knew since they were 15, now in their early 20s and already wives, mothers and covered 'from head to toe.' Seeking to make sense of the events of 9/11, the 7/7 London bombings, Sara said that she fears that because Islamism seeks to control individual liberties and equality, their victory will lead to the dominance of men over women and of fundamentalism over any other ideology. Her greatest fear, she told me, was not violent extremism, but the non-violent one; 'the preachers with hundreds of thousands of followers, who denounce violence, yet share the same puritanical ideology.' In an interview for *Vogue,* she said 'we made a mistake with multiculturalism ... even Germaine Greer defended FGM as cultural relativism,' determined not to make the same mistake with extremism[92]. As a British woman of Pakistani origin, she said 'I find the argument of "not wanting to offend cultural sensitivities" offensive in itself.' She gave the example of the *Universities UK*'s controversial guidelines placed in 2013. The guidelines allowed the voluntary separation of men and women at events such as lectures on Islam by visiting speakers, based on teachings of their religion as 'there does not appear to be any discrimination on gender grounds merely by imposing segregated seating'[93]. The guidelines were withdrawn through the intervention of David Cameron, after sweeping campaigns led by *Southall Black Sisters and Inspire* led by Sara. In an article for *the Independent*, she argued:

92. See https://www.vogue.co.uk/article/sara-khan-we-will-inspire-muslim-group
93. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-life/10510284/Gender-apartheid-segregation-is-real-in-UK-universities.-So-why-arent-more-people-fighting-it.html

> Let me spell it out for *Universities UK*, segregation results in 'less favourable treatment.' It enables the unequal distribution of power between men and women, resulting in gender-based discrimination and inequality … Segregation perpetuates discriminatory social norms and practices, shaping male attitudes about women and restricting the decisions and choices of women. By allowing gender segregation, *Universities UK* is complicit in the gender inequality being perpetuated by ISOCs whose advice will only make it easier for them to treat socially unequal groups, in this case, women, even more unequally … But also, rather astonishingly, *Universities UK* delves into trying to tell us what constitutes Muslim religious belief implying that those opposed to segregation must be people from outside of the Islamic faith, not recognizing that often it is Muslims themselves who oppose gender segregation[94].

In the latter quote, Sara brought together her earlier argument that there is a direct and strong correlation between the rise of religious fundamentalism and the denigration of Muslim women's rights, adding to it a question about the place of Muslim women who do not comply with the image of the 'authentic Muslim woman.' Sara's opinions are in line with secularists, like Salman Rushdie, Mariam Namazie and others, who supported the 'experience of diversity' inherent in the multicultural approach, yet rejected multiculturalism as a political philosophy and policy for submitting to the demands of faith-based communities granting them particular advantages over others which 'has aggravated hostility between minority communities and between Muslim communities and the majority British society' and facilitated 'the rise of Islamic radicalism and in discriminating against women (Orenstein & Weismann, 2016, p. 383). Similarly, in her argument, Serenade was certain that to defeat Islamism, 'cultural relativism' should be rejected and universal rights should be guaranteed for Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Nadia, Aziza and Serenade all opposed the articulation of a 'French Islam,' as it undermined the integration of Muslims into the broader society and created space for dangerous ideologies. They argued that bringing a concept of 'French Islam' forward does nothing but further marginalise Muslims. In the days and weeks following France's latest terrorist attack on a church in Normandy, where an elderly Catholic priest was beheaded by a couple of teenage *jihadis*,

94. See https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/segregating-men-and-women-at-university-events-wont-lead-to-equality-8962984.html

Nadia was all over the media decrying the Interior Minister's push for an 'Islam of France.' 'We don't need an Islam of France, or to be training imams with taxpayers' money,' she told Emma-Kate Symons in an interview[95]. In her words, she said:

> Sorry, we do not want French Islam … we are talking about people who kill other people. We cannot battle this with a person who knows how to read the Qur'an in French! We want our children to live a free life, the life they choose. Religion is something personal; it has nothing to do with the government.

It seems that there is a growing worldwide trend of treating social and political problems by religious remedies, a trend that is reinforced and sometimes initiated by various government organizations (Hélie-Lucas, 2011). It is now *imams* that are called by governments to solve difficulties in the suburbs, prevent riots, etc, as Nadia, Serenade and Sara claimed. Fundamentalist groups seem to be among the few with enough means (in terms of people and of financial availability) to attend to these requests (ibid). These groups thus take, with the blessing of authorities, an essential place in indoctrination and control of the youth of migrant descent. By essentialising culture and religion, any criticism addressed to one specific element of this culture or that religion will be equated to an attack against it. As such, these women were clearly agreeing on challenging both Islamic Fundamentalism and cultural relativism as both feeds into each other.

AND CONDEMN ISLAMOPHOBIA

Increasingly since the 9/11 attacks, Muslims at large have been 'positioned on the geopolitical stage as anti-democratic, anti-liberal and living in societies located outside the western narratives of progress and modernity' (Zine, 2006, p. 2). Jasmin Zine defines the term Islamophobia as 'a fear of Islam or its adherents, that is translated into individual, ideological and systemic forms of oppression (ibid, p.9). The rising Islamic fundamentalism along with Islamophobia represented by various anti-radicalization laws in Britain and

95. See https://womenintheworld.com/2016/09/21/meet-the-founder-of-the-french-jihad-busting-mothers-brigade/

France have circumscribed Muslims' lived conditions, choices and experiences. Furthermore, they both authorized equally limiting narratives of Muslim womanhood. Within the narratives of the women interviewed in this thesis, clear disapproval of organizational Islamophobia was prevalent; however, the ideological positions they held differed. In Britain, despite that the Prevent program proved to be highly controversial and faced much criticism and despite that Sara was persistent in condemning 'anti-Muslim hatred,' she continued to be a staunch supporter of the program, which is perceived by many as 'feeding Islamophobia.' In her book, she dedicated a chapter to praising the strategy and even criticized organizations attacking it. In our interview, she admitted that these policies are 'not perfect' but her argument rested upon the idea that 'there is no better option.' In her words, she told me:

> I have written a lot about Prevent in the book. I suppose it is a good strategy, it is not perfect … It is about dealing with the early stages of radicalization; it is about providing support. It operates in a non-criminal space, there are many examples of Muslim families who are grateful for the support their child has now been safeguarded when no one had a scheme … Muslim organizations did not have a scheme. Prevent is the only scheme that existed. I support Prevent, I think it's a strategy you have to have when you know there've been school kids who are being groomed to join ISIS and children wanting to commit terror … there is an Islamist lobby in this country who have made it their mission to oppose Prevent, entirely, because they are opposed to any attempt to prevent radicalization. We have to be very honest about that.

The problem, Sara said, lies within the Muslim community. In our interview, she asserted that during her work in *Inspire*, she had seen many examples that highlight 'a simmering problem of intolerance within Muslim communities in which people just go in complete denial about.' She accused Muslim organizations of doing nothing to address the rising problem of radicalization. In an interview with *The Times*, she said that Prevent's chief problem is a failure of communication. 'The government failed to explain what it is and is

not'[96]. Unlike Sara, who supported the program unreservedly, Henna presented a detailed and objective overview of how she perceived it. Her arguments included both praise and criticism. She commended its recent revisions for targeting all kinds of extremism vehemently; including far-right extremism and Hindu Nationalist extremism, which she asserted 'is on the rise in this country.' She criticized it for not addressing sectarianism 'such as the abuse and the dis-inclusion of *Ahmadi* Muslims and other minorities in Islam,' and not addressing issues affecting women: 'it only touches upon them very briefly,' she said.

By spring 2014, the French government started to respond to these concerns and for the first time, a national plan was to include soft measures that targeted the passage to violence and the 'process of radicalization' (Hellmuth, 2015, p. 988), designed to address radicalization at the earliest stages and also included an experimental program for reintegration based on the British Channel project (Ragazzi, 2017). Nevertheless, Nadia, Aziza and Serenade, still condemned the policies. Putting forward the idea of a 'policed multiculturalism,' in practical terms meant that the fight against radicalization does not target the entire population, but one very specific community: the Muslim community (Ragazzi, 2017). Unlike Sara and Henna who showed staunch support to the British state's Prevent program, the French women activists I interviewed condemned the government's measures to battling radical Islamism. For them, the very notion of a French Islam created and popularized by the state is a continuation of an assimilation that represses religious expression instead of tackling the root causes of radicalism. To sum up, while both British activists and their French counterparts believed that State policies of integration have not succeeded in battling fundamentalism, British activists supported their current policies of countering terrorism, for a lack of a better option, while French activists fully condemned their policies believing that they failed to mark the roots of the problem.

96. https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/counter-extremism-czar-sara-khan-theres-no-such-thing-as-the-muslim-community-tm9vp2bzn

A 'SECULAR MUSLIM' WOMEN'S MOVEMENT?

Given these contestations, can secular Muslim women activists build a sustained movement that helps battle religious fundamentalism and violent extremism? Before attempting to answer this question, while being aware of debates about whether these often-disparate forms of action could be subsumed under the label 'movement,' I adopt the view that there are different forms of women's movements. One the one hand, some movements are certainly more easily identifiable as collective action than others; those that have a recognisable leadership, a membership, a broader following and a political program. On the other hand, there are more diffuse forms of political activity, which can also qualify as a movement, such as those based on clubs, networks or groups (Molyneux, 2001). 'The definitional boundaries are complicated … however, it seems preferable to reserve the term movement for something that involves more in size and effectivity (ibid, p. 4). But a large number of small associations even with very diverse agendas, can in cumulative terms come to constitute a women's movement (ibid). However, it is not my aim in this research to question whether these women have the potential to become a movement. Rather, my question is whether these women believe they can. In this sense, all the women I interviewed believed they could become a full-fledged social movement; however, they know they are not yet one. They may be a minority voice at the moment, but by no means, they saw themselves as helpless.

Sara, for example, said that she believes that there exists a 'huge majority of Muslims out there who would choose to live in a secular state … but they may be too scared to say it.' She mentioned names like; Amina Lone, co-director of the Social Action and Research Foundation and a Manchester councillor, who won 'secularist of the year by the National Secular Society in Britain in 2018, Iram Ramzan, a 'secular' Muslim reporter and freelance journalist; Henna Rai and others. At the moment, Sara said, these women form loose coalitions against issues like banning headscarves in schools, gender segregation, *Shari'a* councils, 'where women obviously, clearly are more likely to have adverse outcomes than men.' Nadia also saw *Brigade des Mères* as an organization that has the capacity to become a

huge network in France. 'When we started, we only had mothers, now we have mothers, fathers and children. My dream is to find brigades in every city and every village,' she said. These women and men get together to create campaigns, 'whether it's a letter, a petition, or a protest,' she said. Putting Muslim women's issues at the centre of their agendas of activism reflects these women's passion to create platforms for negotiating their own identities as agents of social change.

These women offer a voice that refuses to speak from a subaltern position but aspires to move to the centre where they could be able to reconstruct an ideal with which a strict separation between the modern, secular and Western, on the one hand, and the cultural and Islamic voice on the other do not exist. The similarities between these women lie in combatting religious fundamentalism, fighting for women's rights, dignity, voice and freedom. They all recognized that the control over women's bodies and minds lies not only at the heart of the fundamentalist agenda but also within Islamophobic representations of the social, economic and political difficulties these communities endure. So, in one sense, despite the apparent competition and the somewhat varied perspectives and personal and political histories between British women activists and their French counterparts, these women share a form 'solidarity' that is based on some common political values, a solidarity they themselves are not yet aware of.

Conclusion: Emerging Counter-Narratives?

This chapter expanded and reflected on the meanings and significance of feminism, secularism, religious fundamentalism and the War on Terror, to the women I interviewed. Differences aside, despite that not all women identified as feminist, they shared a common vision where they persistently asserted women's rights to contest manifestations of religion, culture, traditions and norms and challenge leaderships that claim to represent them. None of them opposed religion per se, but rather emphasised the crucial role of secular spaces in ensuring equality for people of all religions and of none. But because notions like feminism and secularism are seen, by some, as western impositions that belittle and marginalise not

only religions but local cultural and moral values, their viability is debated (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2008). In negotiating their multiple and complex identities, these women are not battling one dominant narrative, but multiple contradictory ones, which constrain their women's choices and limit the possibility of creating individualized narratives (McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2014). Despite the challenges, it is clear that these women are in a process of finding means to provide a more liberatory and ccontextualized alternatives to the dominant binary narratives that separate the 'backward Third World Woman' and the 'liberated modern Western woman' (Grewal, 2017, p. 182).

This chapter has demonstrated how these women negotiate multiple, competing narratives to explore the ways by which they self-identify. These narratives were not just a recording of self-identifications or ideologies, but a response to and an engagement with micro and macro politics. The adoption of a subject position that refuses to align with a dominant frame shows that these women drew on the available political opportunities, as well as constraints, resisting, negotiating and tailoring them to achieve their desired identities. Whereas Sara and Henna tried to create a vision of a multi-cultural, tolerant liberal society, that they believed is achievable within the current policies, Nadia, Aziza and Serenade visualised a utopia of a version of a Republican's secularism–that is not applied–with which to criticize the current situation where communities are divided and where intolerance dominates. Some were more experienced narrators than others. But all narratives entailed some level of creativity, or what Francesca Polletta (2006, p. 41) calls 'narrative performance' proscribed by the social context in which they gave their accounts. As she articulates, 'these types of cultural constraints … reflect the institutional rules of the game that those wanting to effect change must play' (ibid). As such, these women's narratives could be understood as attempts to counter-story their lives. They are not simply positioned by existing discourses but are struggling to position themselves in opposition to them by using counter-narratives to expand boundaries, shift focus and create space for alternative versions and visions that highlight the complexity of and redefine the lives of the narrators (McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2014).

VII. Between The Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Narratives of Activism

> I suppose when you step into this area of work; you don't know what to expect either, you just say: I'm gonna stick my head out, I'm gonna say a couple of things and just gonna give my views. But by giving your views, you find that your whole life has changed.

In the previous chapter, I reflected on how secular Muslim women interviewed in this study self-identify and reflect on notions like feminism, secularism, fundamentalism and the War on Terror. The chapter demonstrated that these women adopt positions that refuse to align with any dominant frame while negotiating and tailoring their own emerging counter-narratives. In this chapter, I look at the ways by which these women described their activism and the struggles they face due to their particular choices. The chapter reveals how by giving their views and presenting their positions that their lives have changed. As these women's positions seem contradictory, they are widely misunderstood by various and opposing groups. Consequently, the narratives they drew on when talking about their activism centred around their limited resources and the 'contradictory' battles imposed on them by various opposing forces. In attempting to challenge the dual oppressions of Islamophobia on the one hand and fundamentalism on the other, these women see themselves as caught between narratives that limit their choices and compromise their rights and liberties. Additionally, the chapter reveals the conflicts and divisions within the relationships between the women involved in this particular arena of activism. In part, the lack of resources, as well as the multiple and contradictory forces, meant that despite their seemingly shared political values, they failed to work as a collective, notwithstanding their aspirations to do so. The chapter ends with an exploration of the various narratives of resilience that these women drew on in facing various challenges. The data used for this chapter includes interviews, the websites of *Inspire* and *Brigade de Mères*, articles and blogs written by Sara, Nadia, interviews with them and their published books, Twitter and Facebook accounts. In this chapter, I have tried to feature both women relatively equally,

however, at times, Sara and *Inspire* are given more space than Nadia and her organization. This 'imbalance' is due to the amount of documentary data I have found concerning Sara Khan, especially that her appointment as head of the UK's newly formed Commission for Countering Extremism has resulted in massive backlash and criticism of the government's choice. As such the section on 'Backlash' provides more analysis of documentary material that is concerned with Sara, and less material on Nadia.

LACK OF RESOURCES: 'WE ARE OPERATING ON A SHOESTRING'

During the early years of *Inspire*, Sara and her colleague Tehmina Saleem approached many mainstream Muslim charities in Britain asking for funding. They were turned down every time they approached a Muslim organization, Sara told me with an unmistakable combination of anger and disappointment. Both issues; the battle against religious extremism and the struggle for gender equality, were 'just too controversial' for Muslim charities, she continued. Thus, most of *Inspire's* work that has been completed from 2009 to 2011, was operated 'on a shoestring,' as expressed by Sara. 'Most of the Muslim women's organizations in this country that I know are all operating on a shoestring, not just us. The work they are doing is so pivotal, so fundamental and no one bothered to invest in them because they don't care,' she continued[97]. The work which focused on workshops and training sessions done in partnership with local authorities was based on consultancy fees and the campaigning was completely based on voluntary contributions by Muslim women activists who supported Sara and Tehmina. During these days, *Inspire* barely delivered a couple of workshops each year, Sara told me. The money was 'so scarce' that she even used her salary—from her job as a pharmacist before she quit—to support *Inspire*. In 2010, she

97. Some of the groups Sara points out are: the Islamic Society of Britain (after its split from Islamist influenced organizations); City Circle and the Association of British Muslims who were joined by new groups like Radical Middle Way, founded in 2005, which challenged literalist interpretations of Islam by recourse to the teachings of scholars; British Muslims for Secular Democracy founded in 2006 and led by Tehmina Kazi; Faith Matters & Tell Mama, asserting respectively that such concepts as human rights were compatible with Islam.

decided to stop approaching Muslim charities. With an angry voice and expressions, she told me:

> By about 2010/2011 I knew … They are not interested … so why am I going around wasting my time! They are never gonna help me … I'm not gonna go back to them ever again. And I have not gone back ever since …I don't need to beg for your money when I am trying to fight for women's equality! You know … you Muslim charities, so many of you are funded and donations come from Muslim women yet you are not prepared to defend their rights! … I don't need to beg to get your money.

In this quote, Sara was referring to male-led Muslim organizations who were refusing to support what she called 'non-partisan' organizations like *Inspire*. Sara made no attempt to hide her frustration as she railed against these organizations who, in her opinion, failed to appreciate or support Muslim women's organizations at large, not only hers. After extensive networking, in 2011, *Inspire* received some donations from foundations and private individuals, 'most of which were not Muslim,' Sara said. That was when they organized the conference *Speaking in God's Name.* In her words, she said: 'we were punching above our weight compared to organizations three times our size,' to accomplish such work. Finally, in 2014, Sara decided to approach the Home Office to fund and support their *Making a Stand* campaign. This step, according to Sara was not an easy decision; a very calculated step. Realizing that *Inspire* will 'never' be supported by the majority of Muslim organizations, she was compelled to seek support elsewhere. In her blog, however, she asserted that the Home Office funding for the campaign ended in 2015 and that *Inspire* did not receive any Home Office funding before or after this campaign. It was still not enough to guarantee their survival, she told me:

> Even in 2014/15 when we were funded by the Home Office, we were not even sure if we're gonna last by the end of the financial year because we don't know if we're gonna have money, we don't know where our next sources of income's gonna come. So, for us, funding has always been a massive issue. That's why we could never think of having an office … I couldn't even pay for my salary let alone having an office.

Similar narratives encompassed Nadia's accounts of activism. From 2014 until 2016, *Brigade de Mères* completely relied on personal donations. Their work, which focused on in-person support—finding places for children in state schools, jobs for the older ones and supporting mothers—was all volunteer-based. During these two years, Nadia continued to work at the council of *Seine-Saint-Denis,* while building up her organization. In 2016, she was asked to resign for 'conflict of interest.' This left her feeling immense injustice, as her job was her only source of income. Since she established *Brigade de Mères*, Nadia asserted, 'a few people donated to us, on a personal basis, but no organizations did … we were also promised local government funding in 2016 by Patrick Karam, the vice president of the regional council of *Ille-de-France*, but it did not happen.' She mentioned that 'some organizations' offered funding but 'with conditions.' When I asked her about the nature of these conditions, she replied; 'they would interfere in the organization's work and dictate the type of projects we focus on.' And even though she refused to mention the names of these organizations, she implied in the following quote that they may be related to the state:

> They tell us we would give you this amount of money, but you need to do what we say! I refuse to be given orders … I do not want to work with the state anyway, or I would have kept my job if I wanted to. I resigned because I did not accept to be controlled or told what to do and what not to do!

Once more, in 2017, the organization was promised funding from an international training institute that supports people, groups and organizations, responding to the needs for peace[98]. This promise, like many other promises from many organizations, never materialized, Nadia asserted desolately. The latter organization, as Nadia told me, was supposed to cooperate with *Brigade de Mères* to implement their project *Vigiparents* earlier in 2018. Because the funding promise did not materialize, the project was not implemented until the end of 2018, despite that it was officially launched in April. Like Sara, the lack of funding was a recurring narrative in all interviews I conducted with Nadia. At many instances, she complained about how organizations such as hers are not financially

98. See https://www.institut-charlesrojzman.com/fr/qui-sommes-nous

supported because they refused to abide by certain conditions. Even though, she did demonstrate that, at times, she was hugely supported by the media, the support did not encourage donor organizations to fund their projects.

To sum up, the lack of resources, especially financial and the lack of support from larger organizations, were one of the major hurdles, as these women described in their narratives. This was also apparent in the narratives of Henna, Serenade and Aziza, when talking about their nascent organizations. Henna told me: 'because I don't have resources, I can't expect people to work with me full-time. I've been doing it and holding on another job to supplement myself.' In Aziza's narrative, she said: 'we don't have any money coming through but we do have volunteers.' In the last two decades, similar narratives of women activists appeared (Amara, 2003; Nagar, Richa; Sangtin Writers, 2006; Dhaliwal, 2014). In France Fadela Amara, the former president of *Ni Putes Ni Soumises,* drew on the lack of resources to describe some of the difficulties facing the early days of her organization. Similarly, in Britain, in her introduction to *Women Against Fundamentalism,* Sukhwant Dhaliwal drew on the lack of resources to explain the failure of the organization to work as a collective, which resulted in the members of the organization seeming to be divided.

FRAGILE RELATIONS? 'I'M WORKING ON MY OWN'

When Sara and her colleagues discussed setting up an organization, it was Sara and Tehmina Saleem, who finally took the idea forward. Frequently stating that 'not everyone has the activist bug,' was Sara's main narrative when talking about her team. The rest were not as keen on taking such challenging work as much as Sara and Tehmina, although, they did assist in some workshops and outreach projects, 'as volunteers,' Sara said. In our interview, however, she did not show much eagerness to talk about Tehmina, even when I particularly asked. In response to my question about why she left, Sara said 'I think it was personal issues … but it is also that we were both quite different … we both knew that I was the real kind of activist freak.' Yet, her voice sounded disappointed when she said 'Tehmina dumped seven years of work, but she knew it was time for her to move on.'

After Tehmina's departure, Kalsoom Bashir joined *Inspire* in 2011. She continued working with Sara for a few years, but did not receive a proper salary until the end of 2015, Sara said. While serving as secretary in *Inspire* from 2012, Kalsoom was employed by the Avon and Somerset Constabulary, one of the early issues that brought controversies regarding the nature of the relationship between *Inspire* and the government. In response, Sara claimed that Kalsoom could not resign from her job because *Inspire* could not secure her a proper salary at the time. Kalsoom did not stay long. She was in her 50s and 'she was tired of this,' Sara said. The backlash Inspire faced from 2014 to 2016 due to the support they received from the British government, drove Kalsoom to move on, 'she couldn't take it,' Sara continued. In my interview with Kalsoom, however, she was reluctant to talk about the reasons she left *Inspire*. All that she said in our half-hour skype interview was that they 'had different ideologies, different paths and different approaches to activism.' She dropped a hint saying that she did not agree with *Inspire's* media propaganda to achieve publicity, which, in her opinion, will not solve the problem of religious extremism. In 2016, Yasmine Weaver was hired as a project manager. She started earlier as a part-time project manager, then moved to a full-time position when Kalsoom resigned. Sara did not tell me much about Yasmine either except that she was 'a great lady.' In 2017, during the time I conducted my interviews with Sara, Yasmine was on maternity leave. It was only Sara running the organization.

Similar to *Inspire,* since its establishment *Brigade de Mères* relied on volunteers. But the mothers joining the 'Brigade's movement,' as Nadia called it, exceeded a thousand mothers from all over France. Aziza Sayeh was one of the earliest joining *Brigade de Mères*. In 2016, when the organization started to attract media attention, more women activists in France joined Nadia, like Serenade Chafik. The organization did not just attract secular Muslim women activists but also attracted French women, some affected by the loss of a child who converted to Islam and joined ISIS, like Dominique Bons and Veronique Roy, mentioned earlier. In 2017, during my first fieldwork trip to Paris, I interviewed Aziza and Serenade, to discover that both were no longer supporting Nadia. In my interview with Serenade, she asked me to stop the recorder when I asked her about Nadia. All that she

allowed me to record was that after working with Nadia for a while, she realized that she did not have the knowledge, expertise or capacity to initiate such a 'serious movement.' When I asked Aziza about splitting up with Nadia, she laughed, looked at Dominique Bons and said:

> Nadia doesn't know what she is talking about. She claims that she is in alliance with this and that, but all what she really wants is publicity. She mixed everything … All issues. In short, where she lived, Sevran, was full of radicals and Salafis and she was reporting them. And that is why I say she mixed the cards. She reports everybody, even the ones who are not radicals, merely praying or growing their beards … She gave up her roots and instead of fighting with migrants, she is fighting against them.

Aziza moved away from *Brigade des Mères* and formed new alliances. Serenade also moved away but did not do so quietly. Her conflicts with Nadia took a public route, reaching a point where they both filed police reports against each other with various accusations. Both Nadia and Serenade confided in me but asked me not to write details of their disputes. These disputes were neither reported in the news nor openly mentioned in their social media accounts. In one of my interviews with Nadia, I asked her about whether the 'brigade' of mothers was still as 'strong' as when it started, without mentioning names, she said with regret:

> There were people among us that I trusted without knowing what they stand for. Others did not have enough experience. Without facing similar hardships, how can you help others? Only by hardships that one can understand how freedom is difficult to achieve. For those who didn't feel a ball of fire, they shouldn't have been allowed to join *Brigade des Mères*. I am the daughter of the commoners; I have first-hand experience and that makes all the difference.

Several issues emerge from the stories recounted in this section. Similar to their British counterparts, yet a little forthright, the French women activists interviewed in this thesis displayed apparent disputes and divisions amongst themselves, revealed by their narratives of being on their own. The continuous pull between structuring their

organizations to formally function and the nature of their activism that is based on individual efforts resulted in an uneven relationship between the women contributing to the projects of these organizations. Furthermore, the fact that the women involved in these organizations were also active elsewhere made it even more difficult for these women to form strong alliances. What is also surprising was that their main critiques against each other seemed similar. The tendency to denounce each other as not being grounded in 'the grassroots' cannot be easily dismissed. While the French activists mainly articulated it in terms of 'experience,' their British counterparts seemed to articulate it through elitism, as in focusing on the media and publicity, or in terms of 'authenticity,' as Sara brought it saying 'I'm the real kind of activist.' What also became clear in these narratives is that the issues and debates, among the Secular Muslim women activists interviewed in this project, did not take place in a political void. There is no doubt that the lack of resources and the changing local and global context of these organizations since their establishment, the highly complex, shifting and contested articulations of their politics and priorities, as well as their structural weaknesses, have led to their failure to sustain the alliances that had kept them working for these few years. As cited in Sara Ahmed (2017), Audre Lorde writes in *Zami,* 'In order to survive the weather we had to become stone' (1984b, 160). By the weather, she means social forms of oppression. Women, thus, in her view, survive by hardening. Audre Lorde wrote in relation to black feminists and how easy it was, because of how hard the world was, that black women hurt each other. Additionally, the fact that each of these women refused to be identified in a certain way or to ally with a specific group may have made it even more difficult for them to work jointly. In a postcolonial era, the contestations of identity and authenticity of these women of Muslim backgrounds, are part and parcel of complex processes of self-definitions (Al-Ali, 2000).

Backlash: 'Everybody is Against Me!'

> The problem is that I am everything that they hate; I represent everything that they dislike; I'm not wearing a *hijab,* I am openly secular, independent and I don't shy away from expressing my opinions (Sara Khan).

> As both, women and of Muslim/Arab origin, we've got everybody against us; the government, the community, the family, the neighbours ... But I refuse to act like a victim or be seen as a victim (Nadia Remadna).

These two quotes were among many similar narratives that the women interviewed in this thesis drew on when describing their activism. In our interviews, Sara narrated in great detail the ways in which she experienced backlash, which, in her narrative, emanated from different directions and for various reasons. Additionally, in her book, she provided a list of various groups, whom she believed work against her work. Muslim advocacy groups, she said, criticized her, both for her secular bent, which is perceived as anti-Muslim and for having been funded by the controversial Prevent program[99]. The 'pro-Islamist Left,' she continued, assuming that Islamist leaders speak for all Muslims and that their ideology is normative Islam, accused her of Islamophobia. Feminists, both western and Islamic, those who express apologetic sentiments toward Muslim women, criticized her for portraying Muslim women as victims (Khan & McMahon, 2016). The far-right, who are threatened by the growing Muslim population across Europe, view all Muslims, including her, as 'de facto Islamists,' she carried on. And finally, she said, that even Atheists criticized her (Khan & McMahon, 2016, p. 115). In her book she wrote:

> My work ... has resulted in me experiencing abuse, harassment, threats, online stalking and character assassination ... As a Muslim countering Islamist extremists who justify hatred and violence in the name of my faith, I am accused of being an 'Islamophobe.' I am a 'sell-out' or a 'native informant' because I have delivered projects supported by the UK authorities to dissuade young Muslims from joining ISIS. Speaking out ... has led to my being declared an apostate, alongside my two young children ... When I turned to liberals and some on the Left for solidarity, instead I found painful rejection; some had clearly allied themselves with Islamists. Those on the Right wondered why I even bothered to be a Muslim in the first place when my faith was so 'backward.' The leading light of New Atheism, Richard

99. See https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-017-0061-9

> Dawkins tweeted in 2014 ...: "You pick your peaceful verses, but ISIS can find verses to justify their vile acts. Why not just give up your faith and join the 21st century?" (p. 13).

In my documentary data, however, the overwhelming abuse seemed to have come from Muslim groups. In *Vogue*, Suzie Mackenzie wrote that Sara is regularly called a slag, a whore, an alcoholic on social media sites and has been described as the 'prostitute of the prime minister ("As if") and threatened with ISIS gang rape.' In our interview, Sara said that 'it all started in 2011,' right after *Speaking in God's Name* conference when *Inspire* received 'complaints' from male-led Muslim organizations that 'this conference is a disgrace.' The following major backlash, Sara said, was when *Inspire* lobbied against the *Universities UK* in 2013, 'I got a huge amount of backlash, threats to the kids ... I was being stalked online ... I had to go to the police ... It was awful.' The earliest data I came across that openly criticized Sara's work was from 2014. Here, I provide some examples. I begin with attacks by several Muslim feminist writers and bloggers, followed by some Muslim advocacy groups. I end with examples of the countless criticisms levelled against the government for appointing her as the lead for the Commission for Countering Extremism in 2017.

In 2014, a Muslim feminist blogger criticized Sara of accepting funds from Prevent[100] and having links with the notorious *Quilliam Foundation*[101], a counter-extremism think-tank that was accused of being a 'native informant,' also for collaborating with 'Prevent.' The author argued that Sara's involvement with Prevent and links with *Quilliam* have completely ruined her credibility amongst the mainstream Islamic community, describing her as 'a confused individual' for identifying herself as feminist and attempting to 'empower' women, yet accepting to be 'exploited' by a 'male-led government,' to push a policy that involves further abuse of women as tools. An opinion piece published in *The Guardian* in 2014, attacked *Inspire's* campaign *Making a Stand* and its slogan *United Against IS*, describing

100. See https://coolnessofhind.wordpress.com/2014/10/11/sara-khan-the-feminist-who-abused-women-in-the-pages-of-the-sun/
101. A London-based think tank that focuses on counter-extremism. The foundation lobbies government and public institutions for more nuanced policies regarding Islam and on the need for greater democracy in the Muslim world while empowering "moderate Muslim" voices.

it as 'disingenuous and pointless' and 'dangerously counterproductive,' because it erases cultural differences and creates a brand of British Islam, in which Muslims need to prove their British credentials, or else be condemned of associating with ISIS[102]. Another article, written in 2015, criticized Sara's brand of 'feminism' as a 'double standard.' The author accused Sara of deeming it perfectly acceptable to exclude others who identify as feminists, yet complain of 'intolerance' when Muslims make the charge against her secular reformist ideas about Islam. The author continued:

> The problem with feminists like Sara Khan is that they attribute the negative reaction they receive by the Muslim community as due to their gender (to reinforce amongst themselves their own conspiracy theory of 'patriarchy')–when in reality, the Muslim community actually have a problem with their Secular ideas[103]

In response to Sara's open accusations to some Muslim organizations an article written by 5Pillars[104] in 2015, accused Sara of misleading Muslims. In his Twitter account, Roshan M. Salih (Twitter name @RmSalih), the editor of 5Pillars, constantly attacked Sara, accusing her of being a 'sell-out' for accepting State support. Interestingly, some of Sara's 'enemies,' who are apparently radical Muslims, created a Twitter account named *Sara Uninspire Khan* in 2015 with 440 tweets, the last of in 2017, a few months before her government appointment. The tweets are mockeries, one of which on behalf of Sara says 'I will make life hell for Muslims; I will work towards banning Islam.' Another response to Sara's accusations was from Naz Shah, the Labour MP for Bradford West, who queried *Inspire's* independence from the government. She acquired information from Powerbase.info claiming that *Inspire* 'is a product of the Home Office,' receiving funding since 2007 for projects they executed under their personal names before *Inspire* was officially founded[105]. This information was mentioned by Naz Shah in a piece of written evidence

102. See https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/08/sun-unite-against-isis-muslim-bigotry
103. See https://zarafaris.com/2015/04/24/sara-khan-and-maajid-nawaz-faux-indignation-and-feminist-excommunication-takfir/
104. As stated on its website, is an 'independent and professional Muslim community media platform' focusing on British Muslims. See https://5pillarsuk.com/
105. See http://powerbase.info/index.php/Inspire

submitted to the Parliament, saying that *Inspire* 'is amongst the most loathed organizations within Muslim communities'[106].

Finally, after she was appointed the lead of the new Commission for Countering Extremism in 2017, more than 20 opinion articles and blogs were published in less than 24 hours of her appointment, the majority of which criticized the government's choice. Bushra Wasty, the co-founder of the Muslim Women's Collective wrote in *The Guardian* that 'the choice calls to question the government's overall approach,' based on the controversies around Sara's notoriety among Muslim organizations for supporting 'the widely criticized Prevent strategy,' Wasty wondered whether she would be able to build connections with the Muslim communities who see her as a controversial figure and whether her ideologies mean that women who are 'visibly' Muslim would be considered religious extremists[107]. The former Tory chairwoman Sayeeda Warsi described her appointment as 'deeply disturbing.' She tweeted twice in one day:

> Sara has unfortunately been a strong advocate of the government's policy of disengagement, a policy which many, including members of the police and intelligence services, consider has damaged the important battle to engage Britain's Muslim communities.
>
> For the commissioner to be effective the person had to be an independent thinker, both connected to and respected by a cross-section of British Muslims. Sara is sadly seen by many as simply a creation of and mouthpiece for the Home Office.

Harun Khan, the secretary-general of the Muslim Council of Britain, wrote in an article for *The Independent* that the fight against terrorism requires an equal partnership between all parties, including Muslim communities. In his opinion, Sara's appointment 'risks sending a clear and alarming message that the government has no intention of doing so.' In an article for *The Independent,* Naz Shah wrote an open letter to the Home Secretary, on the appointment of Sara, expressing her 'grave concerns,' claiming that Sara 'fails to

106. http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/home-affairs-committee/countering-extremism/written/27148.html
107. See https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jan/25/concerned-sara-khan-anti-extremism-british-muslims

meet the basic requirements of transparency' and that she is not the person to bridge the Muslim community. On their website, MEND published a piece accusing Sara of coming to 'prominence so quickly' because of her open support of Prevent[108]. On the 29th of January 2018, they published a statement titled 'Remove Sara Khan as head of 'Commission for Countering Extremism,' for her lack of expertise; lack of transparency; and the conflicts of interest with *Inspire* historically soliciting funding from the Prevent programme[109]. On 25th of January, 2018 the *Middle East Eye* wrote that '100 Muslim organizations call on UK government to fire Sara Khan,' condemning her appointment.

Similar to Sara who believed that the backlash she experienced is a result of the work she has accomplished[110], Nadia's account included lengthy narratives about the high price she paid as a result of her involvement in this particular arena of activism. She has received death threats on Facebook and over the phone, she said. In our interview, Nadia identified three major groups that, she believed, opposed her work; 'religious' families in the suburbs; 'Islamised' government officials, who attempt to silence her; and 'intellectuals,' who, in her words, are 'only good at talking.' By intellectuals, Nadia referred to 'communists' and 'feminists' who deny the existence of a problem of 'Islamisation' in France, who accuse her of being an 'Islamophobe' for her calls to battle against the Islamisation of the suburbs. Like Sara, the overwhelming abuse seemed to have come from Muslim groups. In her words, Nadia said:

> Many Muslims in the neighbourhood claim that I am not a 'true Muslim' because I don't wear the *hijab* … They think I am working against them! But … many women are against us as well; they do not want to see rebellious Muslim women. They say women should follow men … wives should follow their husbands; obey.

108. See https://mend.org.uk/news/sara-khan-cant-counter-extremism-tsar/
109. See https://mend.org.uk/whats-new/action-alerts/remove-sara-khan-as-head-of-commission-for-countering-extremism/
110. See http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/religionglobalsociety/2016/10/the-anti-prevent-lobby-are-dominating-the-discourse-not-all-muslims-oppose-prevent/

Here, Nadia implied that because she does not portray the 'authentic' image of the obedient, fully-covered Muslim women, pious people in her neighbourhood denounce her. In a long article, Emma-Kate Symons writes that 'as a result of her attempts to stem the extremist contagion and expose the murky web that merges Islamist networks with criminal gangs and vulnerable young people, Nadia has received death threats on Facebook and over the phone'[111]. One threatening caller who alluded to raping her daughter said 'you help the criminals' and 'we know where your kids go to school … we are going to send over some real Muslim mothers'[112]. In our interview, Nadia said that some 'fully veiled women turned outside her apartment in Sevran protesting with posters reading 'we want mosques not schools,' in response to Nadia's speech on national television in which she said that France does not need more mosques 'but [more and better] schools.' Another phone-call, Nadia said threatened that if she continued 'speaking about us and *Sevran*, we will come to harm you.' Another, she said, lurked to 'cut you with a razor if you don't wear the veil and stop talking against Muslims.'

In her book, Nadia mentioned an incident that happened to her son when she was living in *Sevran*. One of the neighbours called her saying 'Nadia, your son is fighting in the street.' She went down to the street to find several teenagers beating him. 'That was the message,' she wrote. As a response, she started a call to action on *Brigade des Mères* Facebook page to guide these youth out of Islamic Radicalism. She wrote, 'nobody responded,' and that in itself assured her that what happened to her son was a warning directed at her personally, not just a coincidence. She told me that in *Sevran*, her children felt isolated; many of the neighbours stopped talking to them because their mother was working 'against Islam.' That was the reason she moved out of the neighbourhood in 2017, she continued. Nadia was convinced that the attacks on her credibility have been incited, not only by Islamists but by government officials who ally with the ultra-left who dismiss the Islamic State fanatics seeing them as a mere minority and refusing to associate the rise of ISIS

111. See https://womenintheworld.com/2016/09/21/meet-the-founder-of-the-french-jihad-busting-mothers-brigade/
112. See https://womenintheworld.com/2016/09/21/meet-the-founder-of-the-french-jihad-busting-mothers-brigade/

recruitment with the Islamists and their hold over Muslim youth. She mentioned the local Mayor who attacked the organization when Veronique Roy, Quentin's mother publicly criticized him for letting the neighbourhood fall into the hands of religious extremists. In a petition raised to support Nadia in confronting these attacks, a committee from *Brigade de Mères* claimed she was being harassed and threatened by a colleague at the council of *Seine-Saint-Denis*[113]. They carried on writing that Nadia was being subjected to harassment 'for defending Republican values.' If these politicians were disapproving of radical Islam, they would have taken action much earlier, but, their silence shows 'their support to radicalism,' Nadia told me. She believed that French politicians have preferred to accommodate fundamentalist leaders, rather than risk electoral backlash. 'Is it about money or complacency or what? Can't they see what happened to Muslim countries in the Arab springs!' she exclaimed. 'People like us do not have the support of the authorities,' she said, for ruining the reputation of the suburbs and disgracing it.

Nadia told me that she was also accused of anti-Semitism for supporting a Palestinian woman whose son was burned by the Israeli forces. Visibly surprised by these accusations, she told me 'a mother is a mother. I would have supported her whether she is Muslim, Jew, Yazidi, or even Egyptian.' Within the documentary data I have collected, I hardly found open accusations against Nadia, except for the Europe-Israel News website which accused her of anti-Semitism over several online articles, one of which condemned her for attending what they believe was an 'anti-Semitic' event organized by 'Boycott Désinvestissement Sanctions,' a campaign launched by Palestinian civil society in 2005 to boycott Israeli products, culture, etc[114]. However, as Nadia herself admitted, most abuses came from government officials and from Islamists around her neighbourhood, none of which used the media to attack her. 'People like us who work on the grassroots do not receive any actual support … and no matter what we do, we are considered the wrong-doers,' Nadia told me.

113. See https://www.change.org/p/i-f-a-c-soutien-%C3%A0-nadia-remadna
114. See http://www.europe-israel.org/2016/10/nadia-remadna-de-la-brigade-des-meres-confirme-sa-haine-du-juif/

In conclusion, both Nadia and Sara faced contradictory challenges. The largest proportion of these challenges, however, came from Islamist groups. Both believed that leftists supported Islamists in defence of freedom of choice, thus accusing them of Islamophobia. Similarly, both claimed that mainstream western feminists, as well as Islamic feminists, also accused them of Islamophobia. Both believed that their ideological positions and refusing to ally with one particular group was the main reason behind the significant backlash. These narratives resonate with recent narratives of other Muslim women activists in Britain and France. In a dossier published by *Women Living Under Muslim Laws* (WLUML), Marieme Hélie-Lucas (2011, p.2) describes how secular Muslim women are accused of being sold out to governments and labelled racist, or 'Islamophobic,' because they speak against the growing rise of Muslim fundamentalism, 'as if one could not struggle at the same time against both the traditional extreme right and the new fundamentalist extreme right.' Similarly, *Women Against Fundamentalism* assert that this particular arena of activism is facing contradictory challenges:

> On the one hand, it is faced with a growing majoritarian politics of belonging that is exclusionary and often anti-Muslim and draws on either civilizational or Christian fundamentalist discourses. On the other hand, it is confronted by an undercutting of secular and other emancipatory movements by fundamentalist absolutist and authoritarian political projects in all religions. What's more, these latter projects are also connected to a growing identity politics among some minorities (especially but not only Muslims) that often utilize human rights and anti-imperialist discourses. And all of this is taking place within a local and global crisis of neoliberal political economy and a securitarian 'war on terrorism' (Dhaliwal & Yuval-Davis, 2014, p. 8).

Burnout: 'It's Exhausting'

Burnout is a condition predominantly associated with workplace stress (Maslach, 2003). More recently it has been acknowledged as a significant feature of activism. The very nature of activism and the people who constitute them makes activists particularly vulnerable to experiencing emotional exhaustion and burn out (Downton & Wehr, 1997). The

commitments the women I interviewed had in their lives, including full-time work, home, children and family responsibilities were noteworthy. Aside from one-off events such as protests (which require considerable preparation and organization), meetings, daily 'background' work sending emails, maintaining websites, signing petitions, issuing press releases, etc., though seemingly mundane, take on a heightened significance for these activists. Further to the importance of the significance of this work to them, the nature of it is largely confrontational. In dissenting the status quo and using narratives that are not always in line with what others expect to hear (Muslims, feminists, Leftists, the Right, etc), these women put themselves in a position that requires 'deintegration from societal norms,' (King, 2005, p. 152). The emotional trauma that results contributes significantly to activist burnout.

In our first interview, Sara told me; 'what I did is burn myself out with work that should have been done by at least five people.' As a trained pharmacist with an MA in human rights, she could have pursued any number of 'normal jobs.' But she chose activism; one that is contested, resulting in her having to deal with various challenges. During our interviews, Sara continually repeated that it is 'hard' to be an activist; 'you burn out, it's exhausting, it's tiring … not everyone wants to do that for the rest of their life.' In an interview with *Vogue*, she said that sometimes she thought to herself, 'I could get a normal life. Why am I doing this? It's just so hard'[115]. Toward the end of our final interview, she told me:

> It's horrendous, it is really horrendous. They just try to stop everything that we do all the time … So, every day I face a constant battle of people who are trying to stop me promoting the very values that as a society we all want to live under. It's a daily thing I experience all the time … Half my time is spent battling. I shouldn't be doing that, I should just be spending minor time on that, but then that takes so much of your mental time, your emotional, psychological and physical. It's really hard … That's all is to bully me, to

115. See https://www.vogue.co.uk/article/sara-khan-we-will-inspire-muslim-group

> intimidate me, to silence me … to finish me off … That's how I feel all the time, it's really difficult!

Despite that her organization is only starting, Henna displayed similar emotions. Speaking about her efforts to establish an organization, she told me that 'it has been very difficult.' Similarly, Aziza and Serenade expressed feelings of burnout, albeit, have not yet reached the point of exhaustion that Sara referred to. In one of her Facebook posts, in which she was responding to attacks on her organization, Nadia revealed a sense of burnout; 'I had enough and now it is time to respond.' Yet during our interviews, she mostly displayed confidence and optimism. In her narratives, she described her activism, as the fresh breeze she felt in the face of adversities. She perceived her escape from Algeria and her divorce which resulted in her being a single mother of four for many years on her own as the real difficulty. In fact, being an activist helped her overcome these hardships and feel a greater sense of purpose. In light of this, it is important to look at the strategies that these women developed and deployed to address the stresses and traumas that are embedded within the very emotional culture of their activism.

NARRATIVES OF RESILIENCE

As Michel Foucault (1980) notes, resistance exists at each site of power. Like all activists, the women whose stories are recounted here are not simply passive recipients of hegemonic discourse but are also active in resisting and creating meanings. In this section, I focus the narratives that these women drew on when talking about the ways they coped, managed and survived the latter perceived pressures. These narratives of resilience are located at the intersections of several interrelated themes; anger as a stimulus that initiated action (Adams, 1995); a deep awareness of and conviction in their cause; hard-work and dedication; the recognition by individuals and organizations; and the ability to handle criticism. In our interviews, Sara recounted lengthy stories about the accusations that various Muslim groups threw on her and her organization. She was both angry and cynical. In an interview with Suzan Mackenzie, she told her that even though some of the accusations may not sound

very serious, 'but to smear my character like that in the conservative Muslim communities in which I work is incredibly damaging.' In my interview with her, she admitted that these accusations have left a negative impact on her image and the work *Inspire* has engaged in deeply affecting her relationship with the Muslim community. These narratives were repeated frequently during our interviews. Yet, she asserted that this kind of backlash became the foundation of her resilience, as she was able to learn to channel her anger into actions. William Gamson (1992) argues that a central component of any collective action frame is a sense of injustice, which in turn, legitimates the expression of anger directed toward the source of injustices. Emotions of anger are also activated when people identify with a disadvantaged group (Wlodarczyk, Basabe, Paez, & Zumeta, 2017). The centrality of anger to collective action, thus, stems from its link with action (Hercus, 1999). In response to my question about dealing with challenges, Sara said:

> No one's ever wanted to invest in this work. And the funny thing is … you've got all Muslims who genuinely think the reason Sara is doing all this counter-extremism work is because the government is throwing millions of pounds at her. … I had to sacrifice so much of my own life. I've had no salary for years and you … think that I'm driving around in a Jaguar and I've got an office in bloody Chelsea and Kensington! … you've got no clue about reality at all … I'm running around like a headless chicken. The only reason *Inspire* is still alive because of sheer dedication, hard work, blood, sweat and tears sorry, I'm so pissed off by it! You've got no bloody clue!

Here, in response to those who 'spread lies' about her and her organization, Sara described her strength as derived from hard work, sacrifice and dedication, rather than the abundance of resources. Her tone was a mix of cynicism and anger. But it was not only anger that motivated Sara to persist. She also learned how to handle criticism, which she, as well as all the women interviewed in this project, frequently described as developing 'thick skin.' Sara told me:

> I think, personally, when you first experience that kind of abuse and backlash, it's a real shock to the system. But your skin gets thicker, you get tougher and it makes you even more determined. I think if you didn't have that it wouldn't keep you going … it makes you even

> more convinced that what you're saying is right. So, I think, you know, people are scared to stick their head out because they will think "oh I'm gonna experience that backlashes" and they don't want to because they are fearful of it. You know my advice to those would be that you have to experience it, because it makes you stronger, it makes you better, it makes you more of a fighter, it makes you learn things about yourself that you never knew existed, you learn about your own inner strength and that can only be a good thing … If you experience that kind of backlash, you become even more confident about yourself … It makes you a stronger person. So, it's like, yeah, fine it's horrible but you just gonna do it, you just gonna keep going.

James Downton & Paul Wehr (1997) argues that how activists manage tensions is critical to their ability to sustain a commitment to their cause and their own personal development. Dealing with this kind of backlash, even one that the individual may be proud of and committed to, is socially and psychologically demanding (Goffman, 1963). Erving Goffman's (1963) observes that the 'stigmatised' may make an effort to keep the stigma from looming large, by masking one's political preferences. However, some do not manage their stigma by concealing their political ideologies, instead, they express them intensely and publicly. In Sara's case, apparent in the latter quote, instead of conforming to the ideologies of these 'generalized other' (Anspach, 1979), she sought the power to define the situation for herself, by speaking out loud against her adversaries. The backlash taught her to manage her tensions by becoming stronger; 'more of a fighter,' and more confident about what she stands for.

Additionally, Sara stressed that her sustained commitment was derived from her engagement with Muslim women and the recognition she received. She asserted that despite the hardships she faced, the early years of *Inspire* were 'fulfilling and insightful.' Her growing awareness of social and cultural patterns of discrimination affecting Muslim women in Britain helped her to further identify with a larger cause. The support she received from some ordinary people, both men and women, who praised her work, she said, was 'life-changing.' Knowing that the majority of her Muslim community stand against her, the appreciation and recognition by a few gave her confidence in her work and an additional

sense of responsibility which enhanced her persistence. Building alliances, new types of friends and like-minded people, she said, helped her feel the significant value of her work. In our interview she told me:

> I formed a whole new set of friends and people whom I'd never really known before, who would say "Oh my God Sara, we love what you're saying, where have you been? this is fantastic" … I suppose that kind of experience really matters … it changes your life … Muslims who will say "everything you're saying is spot on … keep going, don't stop … you've got to fight back against those Islamist extremists." So, you get that mix from within Muslim communities. And then within wider society, I think ordinary members of the public they love it … in their mind, they see what you're saying as providing a vision for the future of this country.

Non-Muslim organizations such as *Hope not Hate*, a UK-based political action and advocacy group, which campaigns to counter racism and fascism; *Southall Black Sisters*, a non-profit secular and inclusive organization, aiming to highlight and challenge gender-related violence against women; *British Muslims for Secular Democracy*, a non-profit organization dedicated to supporting secularism in Britain, directed for many years by Tehmina Kazi, were some of the supporters and alliances Sara mentioned in her book. In our interview, she mentioned receiving much support from Amina Lone. In fact, Amina Lone was one of the very few who praised the choice of the government to appoint Sara. These 'few' supporters, in Sara's narrative, were very important in sustaining her activism and motivating her to persist despite the challenges. Lastly, the media recognition of *Inspire's* work, Sara said, was another motivation. But she believed the hard work that she and her acquaintances continued to show and her own resilience as an activist was what brought the media attention to them. She also pointed at her own personal skills and the uniqueness and urgency of the work *Inspire* did, as important factors that influenced its success. In her words, she said:

> I think probably this organization is quite unique. How many Muslim counter-extremism and women's rights organizations are out there …? People always say to me whether there is *Inspire* in France or there is *Inspire* in Germany and I say "no there isn't." I think our work

> is quite unique and I think that's probably a selling point. But also, because I think you know I can do the media, I can write, I think that's kind of my own skills have made me I think able to have that profile. I think it's just a combination of all those things really.

Unlike Sara who spoke about the backlash she received with immense anger; Nadia spoke in a much calmer manner. 'People talk and gossip, that's normal … I am not doing this for people to love me. I do it for the sake of the youth,' she said. Nadia's house, which I visited twice, hardly contained any furniture, except for a sofa and a small television set, which revealed a seemingly straining financial situation. She told me—in a cynical, yet, relaxed voice—the first time I arrived at her flat, 'look around you! and they say Nadia is famous, she's got lots of support, blab la!' Drawing on her convictions in a bigger cause that drives her to action was one of Nadia's frequent narratives. And even though she acted more cynical than enraged during our interviews (given that they could both reflect feelings of anger), when speaking of whom she called 'intellectuals' and 'rich politicians,' Nadia expressed much frustration. 'They live in rich neighborhoods and know nothing about the problems of the poor' she said. Yet, even though she told me that she usually does not respond to accusations or attacks, she frequently wrote on the organization's Facebook page statements like 'leave us alone,' 'let us work in peace' and 'stop threatening us,' without referring to a particular name or affiliation. In January 2018, she wrote a long post on Facebook titled 'My dirty story.' The post narrated stories of people from her neighbourhood who criticized her, colleagues who silenced her, Islamists who threw false accusations on her, even strangers who 'posted lies' about her. The post revealed a sense of anger masked by cynicism. Excerpts of the post are as follows:

> For those who follow "our dirty stories", we helped many people who were abandoned … we intervened several times in an emergency, contacted the police, the town hall, etc., until we resolved their problems …We supported, listened, accompanied and gave the floor to many to share their stories. We were criticized for it and some abandoned *Brigade de Mères* for our support to some mothers … Yet, our spirits are high, even though …we are all volunteers … I even lost my job, following my commitment and my speeches in the media. And I am also shamed for having moved out of Sevran! So, what! Is it a crime to leave a

place I was threatened and harassed in? … Fortunately, my team is still faithful; I cannot thank you enough for all your support.

In this post, like Sara, Nadia drew on her years of experience as her strength and 'the few' who supported her as her driver to carry on. In August 2016, in response to donations made by ordinary people from the public, she posted a photo of hundreds of letters on the organization's Facebook page with a comment that says 'on behalf of the entire team of *Brigade de Mères*, a big thank you to all the people who supported us and to all the people who have made donations.' Furthermore, like Sara, the publicity she received from the French media, she said, facilitated the building of a 'credible' image of a woman who was 'surely' an expert in her field. She also believed that the publicity she received after addressing the French President Francois Hollande gave her additional authority and credibility. Following the event, 'big organizations' invited her to speak at conferences and looked upon her as a professional, she said. 'My voice is better heard now' she continued, 'and the people I help motivate me to carry on; these mothers and children who face injustices appreciate what I do for them and because they have faith in me, I carry on.' It is the sense of responsibility and deep conviction in her cause, like Sara, that kept Nadia going.

And finally, Nadia received support from some public figures, like Nicolas Dupont-Aignan[116], the president of the political party *Debout la France* and the philosopher Elisabeth Badinter who said in an interview for *Le Point* in 2016 that she supports Nadia because she is 'lucid and courageous,' and that she considers her, along with a growing number of Arab-Muslim women who speak courageously, 'the current representatives of Enlightenment'[117]. In her narrative, Nadia drew on this type of support as a motive to her activism and persistence. But like Sara, it was also because of her first-hand 'personal' experiences in the suburbs that she became the go-to expert in the battle against Islamic fundamentalism, she

116. Nicolas Dupont-Aignan, often nicknamed as NDP, has been the member of the National Assembly since 1997 and was Mayor of Yerres from 1995 to 2017. He was a member of the Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) party until January 2007, then founded the Guallist and Souverainist Party Debout La France in November 2008. He ran for President of France in 2012 and 2017 and endorsed the runner-up Marine Le Pen in the 2017 second round. See https://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-election-aignan-idUSKBN17U2OR

117. See http://www.lepoint.fr/societe/elisabeth-badinter-appelle-au-boycott-des-vetements-islamiques-02-04-2016-2029569_23.php

said. 'I lived it, felt it and got burned by it and had the passion to help people on the ground,' she told me. Her ability to connect with people on the personal level, thus, was perceived by her as a big asset. In her words, she told me 'I accomplished all this because of the empathy I am able to show when I talk to people.' And finally, like Sara, Nadia portrayed a sense of urgency in the work she does and a huge sense of responsibility, which, along with the little support she received, compelled her to persist.

Taking together the many elements of these women's stories, one could argue that their sustained commitment to this arena of activism, despite the challenges they faced, was derived from various interrelated factors. The several influences that shaped their beliefs during their formative years, especially seeing first-hand 'the evils' of Islamic fundamentalism, had made them ready for the battle. Furthermore, the opportunity that allowed them to socialise with 'like-minded people,' was their incentive and a final push to establish their organizations. The opportunities they had, exemplified in the rise of ISIS and the little support they received were their drivers to carry on. The battles they were compelled to face, which developed their sense of anger helped them build resilience that others did not have. Becoming 'public figures' provided them with a new 'activist identity' (Downton & Wehr, 1997), which lent them an additional sense of responsibility. Their ability to manage their everyday life commitments with their activism, along with the support and the recognition they received, all helped them overcome the challenges they were faced with while running their organizations. These narratives show that this resilience could rarely be attributed to either choice or chance. Instead, they show a sense of an ongoing process of making meanings from these challenges and pressures.

Revisiting the Narratives

During my final interview with Sara, she told me that she was becoming fearful. 'One day, one angry Muslim thinking that I am a *Kafir* (an apostate) may take actions against me with his own hands,' she said. 'But there's nothing to be done about that' she continued. Fear may signal the activist's insufficient power relative to an overpowering 'other' (Kemper,

2001)–'the incapacity to deal with danger' (Barbalet, 1998) and feeling a responsibility for this incapacity may result in withdrawal or 'flight;' (ibid). As I have not met Sara for almost a year since that final interview, I could not know why has she accepted the government's appointment at the time, as she told me, she had many solid plans for the future of the organization. In May 2018, while I was writing up this dissertation, I learned that Sara will speak at the annual conference held by the National Secular Society in London. Without hesitation, I rushed to the conference, where I finally met her. I was not planning to conduct another interview with her, especially since my writing was coming to an end, but the pressing questions that I had in mind, I knew, would not require more than a brief conversation. When I approached her table, she welcomed me with a big smile. She looked much happier and calmer than in 2017. She even said with a grin, 'I remember swearing a lot during our interview.' We had a short casual conversation through which I asked her a couple of questions. First, I asked her whether, after being appointed by the Home Office she faced the same pressures? She responded that she was still a secular Muslim woman, 'and that will never change.' In her words:

> I will always experience the same type of backlash … the difference now, however, is that I feel supported, both emotionally and in terms of security. Working in civil society is hard, you're always on your own.

I, then, asked her why she had not told me about the government appointment. Her response was very brief; 'when I met you, I was not sure I will receive the job offer.' The reason for accepting this appointment, Sara said, she was ready for a new challenge. She wanted her voice to be heard within policymaking circles. She believed she could bring about real change by taking such an 'influential position.' In her words:

> Do you know what it means for a Muslim woman to be offered such a position? If I have not taken it, it would have been offered to a white man, who would not have had first-hand experience or have been able to tackle women's issues within Muslim societies as a Muslim woman would.

As I listened to Sara, I thought I would hear a different narrative, now that she is not in civil society any more, however, I was wrong. In her speech which drew on building alliances through respectful and meaningful dialogues, she narrated the story of her activism, starting with her ten years of experience of running *Inspire*, which brought her 'face to face with extremist groups.' Drawing on her experiences of backlash, she said, 'I also know what it feels to be targeted by extremists,' recounting how her identity and beliefs have resulted in abuse and threat Islamists, far-Right and Hard Left extremists:

> Islamists do not accept my brand of Islam and see me as a threat to the society they would like to create. Being a Muslim woman who subscribes to democratic ideals, human rights norms and who refuses to conform to the demands of preachers so frequently placed on women has often placed me as an outgroup, who faces abuse and denigration … On the other spectrum, the far-Right just hate me by virtue of being Muslim. They assume I must secretly hold Islamist tendencies, that I am sympathetic to *jihadis* … No matter what I say or do, in their eyes, I will always be one of them, a Muslim and should therefore, be opposed at all costs. And then there's the far left. They don't believe I'm the "right" kind of Muslim, both religiously or politically. If I'm not screaming anti-American troupes or anti-western narratives, then my identity as a Muslim is meaningless … I must count the times I myself as a Muslim woman has been labelled an Islamophobe not only from Islamists but from far-left non-Muslim activists.

As opposed to Inspire, Brigade de Mères continues to run despite the lack of resources, the immense backlash and the divisions between Nadia and her former acquaintances. I have not lost contact with Nadia. I have frequently called her when I had questions in mind or needed clarification on something she has said during our interviews. I have also continued to follow the latest news about her work and the work of *Brigade de Mères*. Since the French government's launch of the new anti-terrorism measures in 2018, Nadia's news has come back to the fore, with several television interviews and online pieces. In February 2019, she was invited to give a speech at an international conference in Paris organized by UNESCO titled *Islam in the 21st Century.* Her speech began by requesting a minute of silence in memory of the victims of terrorism. She carried on to assert that her commitment to the battle against Islamic fundamentalism is not an easy one; as she has

been herself insulted, harassed, threatened and also lost her job because of the work she insisted to continue. In her speech, Nadia stressed that her priority is to multiply cultural centres, theatres and schools in the areas where Muslims live in France so that they can grow a sense of belonging to their country of birth. She emphasised that instead of trying to reform Islam, Islam cannot be reformed and she asks everybody to abstain from giving people false hopes of a modernised Islam, instead, she calls for the supremacy of the French Republic principles of *Laïcité*: freedom, equality and fraternity.

This recounting of my final encounters with both Sara and Nadia reveals that the narratives of both women continue to be a response and engagement with the micro and the macro-level politics; not only religious fundamentalism and the 'War on Terror,' but also their relationships with each other and the narrative of working 'on my own.' Their narratives, as argued in the last chapter, did not neatly reproduce any of the dominant discourses about Muslim women, but was a creative appropriation of several discourses in response to emergent circumstances. In their narrative, they avoided being portrayed as victims,' but they also avoided giving the impression that they were fully empowered. Narrating themselves as embattled at times, yet resilient at all times, which allowed them a sense of agency in disempowering circumstances. Drawing on the hostility they continued to face in their everyday life and activism, reveals their keenness in being seen as fighters. Nonetheless, despite the various life changes, these women's accounts of their activism changed surprisingly little. Their narrative is a result of their biography and life experiences which drew on available discourses and responded to material opportunities and constraints. Recently, both Sara and Nadia were featured in a recent book and project titled 200 Women who will Change the Way you see the World[118]. Both women were portrayed in the book as 'real women' with 'real stories' worth uncovering. This is how both women portray themselves to be; women with stories worth telling.

118. See http://www.twohundredwomen.com/

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have looked at the ways by which these women described their activism and the struggles they faced due to their particular choices. The narratives these women drew on when talking about their activism, centred around the limited resources and the 'contradictory' battles imposed on them by various opposing forces. In attempting to challenge the dual oppressions of Islamophobia on the one hand and fundamentalism on the other, these women saw themselves as caught between discourses and narratives that constantly limit their choices. Entangled within these challenges, these women perceived themselves as Muslim feminists who are battling not only both these fronts but also the often-conflicting ideological positions they hold amongst themselves, which has created seemingly conflicting divisions.

This chapter demonstrated that these women's involvement in this particular arena of activism was the outcome of a narrative evaluation of their circumstances and the material opportunities and constraints, echoing several recent biographies of secular Muslim women activists (Amara & Zappi, 2006; Hélie-Lucas, 2011; Dhaliwal & Yuval-Davis, 2014). A common criticism of narrative is that they are of limited value in explaining real life. However, another view sees reality as narratively constituted, offering plots, themes, categories and processes for making sense of flows of emergent events (Davis, 2002; Andrews, 2007). Therefore, experience does not exist without narrative. Understanding the complexities of the processes involved in constructing a narrative, thus, avoids the risk of misinterpreting what these women meant when they talked about their lives, their identities and their activism. Following these women's journeys (from their narratives of their childhood, the development of their activist identity and doing the job) showed that victimisation and agency are not static qualities of a person, but are enacted through complex processes embedded in context. Throughout the previous chapters and this one, it was possible to find examples of both successful and failed attempts at defending their positions and standpoints. As such, these women continue to negotiate and renegotiate their positions within the limited discursive spaces available for them. Their narratives of

resilience revealed that despite the challenges they faced, these women were able to sustain a commitment to this arena of activism. The changing local and global context of both organizations since the days of their establishment, mainly in terms of the rise and fall of ISIS territories, the highly complex, shifting and contested articulations of their politics and priorities, as well their structural weaknesses have meant that they may not be able to sustain the alliances that had kept them formally working for these few years. In the case of Sara, the decision was to shut down and accept the government's post, which she understood as a strategic move necessary at the time, rather than a defeat. In the case of Nadia, the decision was to rebrand and work in parallel with the government's plan to counter-extremism instead of against it. In both cases, each narrative continued to draw strategically on the available opportunities to negotiate the available spaces.

VIII. CONCLUSION: COMPLEXITIES AND CONNECTIONS

This thesis is about secular Muslim women's attempts to counter-story their lives as the prevailing discourses and dominant narratives becomes unhelpful or, at times, even harmful (McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2014). It is also an examination of the challenges and complexities of such discursive work. At its core is two organizations; *Inspire* in Britain and *Brigade de Mères* in France, battling Islamic fundamentalism and gender inequality; and five life stories of Muslim women working alongside them. In examining this arena of activism, I aimed to map an image of Muslim women's activism that encourages alternatives, not only to assumptions of homogeneity and powerlessness but also assumptions of unquestionable agency. The reality is far more complex than a simple binary explanation of Muslim women as either victimised or liberated. Throughout this thesis, it has become clear that any analysis of the tensions and complexities surrounding the activism of the women whose stories are recounted here needs to address the wider political culture in which these debates take place

(Al-Ali, 2000). As part of my quest to make secular Muslim women's activism visible, hearable, understandable and noticeable, I have recounted life stories and political reflections of secular Muslim women activists working on battling religious fundamentalism in Britain and France. By examining these narratives, I have sought to appreciate the complexity of living and telling about being a secular Muslim woman activist. As a feminist scholar/activist, I am compelled to support and understand the intricacy of such discursive resistance and the circulation of alternative visions and voices, that open up new possibilities. As such, rather than approaching these women's accounts of activism as records of events and experiences, I have approached them as narratives (Davis, 2002; Andrews, 2007; Woodiwiss, et al., 2017). Doing so drew attention to the complexities intricate in giving an account of involvement in activism.

In challenging western feminist assumptions of powerlessness, postcolonial gender scholarship has strived to highlight and problematize the different social, economic and political dynamics that influenced and created the contexts in which Muslim women inhabited, revealing the complexity of the relationship between women as active subjects in their 'liberation' and as objects of other wider political projects, rejecting the argument that portrayed Muslim women as passive, subjugated and so forth (Badran, 1995; Kandiyoti, 1996; Abu-Lughod, 1998). However, these explanations reflect an understanding of these women as 'an undifferentiated crowd,' united by their faith, irrespective of whether they are 'practising Muslims' or not (Moghissi, 2011, p. 18). Although my research is not the first to emphasise that Muslim women's activism is immensely diverse and complex—other than a few autobiographies written by secular Muslim women activist/scholars—it is the first comprehensive study that explores the activism of Muslim women in the West involved in this particular arena; a study that seeks to understand the processes of this involvement.

The question of how have these women arrived at this particular arena of activism was fundamental to this project. Rather than looking at their motive for involvement, this research has sought to understand their journeys through the recounting of their life stories, which displayed rich historical, cultural and personal details highlighting distinctive features of each woman's life story. The narratives that illustrated formative experiences of these

women, demonstrated how particular historical connections, along with the personal experiences rooted in them, have facilitated each woman's sense of her journey to activism. The contributions made in this research in its efforts to answer the latter question lay primarily in its faithfulness to their narratives by mapping the 'peaks and valleys' of their life stories, which made it clear that these stories are anything but linear processes and that even as I 'generalize' these findings, I run the risk of suggesting a falsely unifying narrative. Instead, I have only indicated various connections between these stories.

In their narrative, it was apparent that the political development of these women is connected with a widely shared experience amongst these women of feeling 'out of place' or 'out of time' in their surroundings and therefore of searching for a philosophy that fits more clearly with their perspectives. None of these women described a single moment of revelation, rather a gradual unfolding of her 'activist' identity, often materializing as a growing awareness of societal inequalities. They mentioned a prevalent sense of rebelliousness that was ever-present from childhood and only through recognizing that it was not universally shared were they forced to come to terms with themselves as 'unique' from the society at large. Finding their voices and consciousness in response to societal contradictions, their activism was woven through their life experiences and consciousness of both privilege and oppression and was shaped by the intersectionality of their family histories, mixed cultures, social class lenses, gender and ideology. Activism, thus, became a useful tool and a powerful resource both for analysing and acting upon these contradictions.

In attempting to find answers for the question of what do secular Muslim women say when they talk about themselves, it has become clear that these women are struggling with dominant discursive constructions of their experiences. The resulting implications were that they find themselves battling not one dominant narrative, but multiple contradictory ones, which constrain their choices and limit the possibility of creating individualized narratives (McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2014). Given these challenges, it has become evident in this research that these women are in a process of searching for means to provide more liberatory and contextualized alternatives to the dominant narratives. Their narratives could be understood as attempts to counter-story their lives and experiences. As

we consider the role of such emerging counter-stories, we are faced with a new important set of questions. How do we recognize these stories in their emerging state and decide whether they hold potential for liberatory means? And 'how do we collectively nurture them so that they don't remain a weak form of resistance that has little material effect, or worse, become co-opted and silenced in service of the master?' (McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2014, p. 12). While master narratives are easily reproduced given their power as taken-for-granted truths, counter-narratives require 'a good amount of finesse *on the part of the listeners*' (ibid, p. 193). In exploring and circulating these voices, thus, I hope to stimulate others to develop practical applications that support such discursive resistance alongside the growth and circulation of alternative visions.

And finally, in responding to the question of what do these women say when they talk about their activism, it has become apparent that these women's attempts to counter-story their lives have come at a price. The emergence and evolution of organizations like *Inspire* and *Brigade de Mères* illustrate unresolved issues. The crisis of the political left, the rise of right-wing politics which is often exclusionary and anti-Muslim and the increased popularity of Islamist groups among the masses of Muslim population have often put these women activists on the defensive. Nevertheless, they are challenging these discourses by constructing new terms of reference and searching for new forms of organization. It is in the context of this endeavour that these women activists are creating emerging counter-narratives and oppositional discourses to the prevailing narratives and growing politics of belonging. In what follows, I take the task of synthesizing and extending insights brought forth through the chapters of this thesis; the stories narrated, the ideologies and identities explained and the challenges recounted to highlight their practical relevance and suggest future research.

The 'Mundane' Matters

When I met Sara for the first time, she told me: 'I represent everything that they hate.' She was trying to explain why secular Muslim women battling Islamic Fundamentalism, like

herself, are facing hostility and opposition from various directions. To clarify what she meant by her statement, it was vital that she tells her life story, in her own words, bringing to the fore what she believed matters most and pushing to the back what she considered trivial. It is through narrative research that this study has been able to capture these meanings, that at times, could have seemed 'mundane' to the reader. It is by weaving the pieces of the story together that this thesis was able to capture why the narrators told their stories the way they did. Inspired by the concerns of feminist scholars, this work is an endeavour to make clear the importance of the mundane. In this section, two theses are brought together in attempts to reveal ways in which the mundane becomes noteworthy. The first derives from the arguments that personal narratives/stories help in transforming private meanings into public ones (Davis, 2002; Hemmings, 2011) and personal into political (Andrews, 2007; Guest, 2016; Ahmed, 2017). The second is that stories are a vital human strategy for sustaining a sense of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances (Munro, 1998; Polletta, 2006).

The stories recounted in this thesis provided evidence that attending to the specifics of everyday life can uncover points of connection and convergence across accounts, which prompts stories—that have particular individual meaning—to form a collective when considered together. The formative experiences that encouraged individual engagement in women's activism constituted reference points and sources of ideas and action, in one way or another, even though these experiences were lived distinctly. The patterns that emerged across these women's situated and particular stories, the repetition of general narratives, the investment in perseverance, the challenges of validating emotions and the continuous negotiation of belonging and meaning-making, transported these stories from the individual to the collective (Guest, 2016). These patterns say something about how these particular arenas of activism were developed, lived and grounded in the everyday. I focused on the everyday to highlight the framing of the moments and encounters through which these women journeyed to activism. Thus, rather than imagining the activism of secular Muslim women to be a static and clearly outlined entity, looking at narrative offered means of formulating an understanding of how political identities are lived and formed through

everyday moments and encounters (Guest, 2016). As Charles Tilly describes, political identities are 'always, everywhere relational and collective' (cited in Andrews, 2007), even when they are articulated by individuals, they are socially embedded.

But identities are always in transition, always producing themselves 'through the combined processes of being, belonging and longing to belong' (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 201). These processes are often reflected in narrative. According to Petra Munro (1998, p. 5) 'how individuals construct their stories, the tensions, the contradictions and the fictions, signifies the very power relations against which we write our lives.' It is what Francesca Polletta (2006) describes as 'narrative performance.' Yet, despite that the stories recounted in this thesis provide insights into these women's decisions to participate in social and political activism, they also present what these women chose to portray about themselves. Class, race, ethnicity and ideology have been shown to create significant differences in how people tell their stories (Sangster, 1994). Cultural values shape the very ordering and prioritizing of events. In this sense, narratives provide a very rich basis from which to explore political identities. How one positions oneself in relation to dominant narratives may vary from one person to another, yet all of us create our narrative from the 'toolkit' which is culturally available to us (Andrews, 2007). These women live within two different cultures, which makes it even harder for them to choose a story-telling strategy. They belong to a generation that is re-constructing and re-integrating both their parents' different traditional and cultural notions and their idealisation of a western identity. Holding on to some aspects of their parents' homeland cultures, while at the same time embracing ideas that seem contradictory to these cultural notions, makes it even more difficult for them to create a story that satisfies everybody. This, at times, makes their stories seem incoherent. Francesca Polletta (2006, p. 52) argues:

> Hegemony operates not by way of a single canonical story repeated over and over again in identical form, but rather by way of many stories that are quite different from each other but navigate similarly between the poles of familiar symbolic oppositions. Against that backdrop, stories that challenge those oppositions are either disbelieved or assimilated to more familiar stories.

Following Francesca Polletta, I argue that the credibility of such narratives comes from the fact that they are 'both ubiquitous and diverse' (p. 45). Thus, narrative power stems from its complexity. These women who chose to openly denounce practices of their own communities, while at the same time criticizing the current western policies against these practices, have frequently faced the adversities of not belonging to either pole thus 'distrusted' by both. Shedding light on these stories may uncover some of the complexities of the realities of these women's lives and in turn, the significance of their activism. Even though I do point out some trends and similarities in the lives of these women, my aim here is to shed light on the complexities of their lives. The bulk of academic research on Muslim women's lives has usually homogenized their experiences. In this thesis, I show that even though experiences may, in ways, seem similar, they are diverse, intricate and complicated. But the narratives cannot be revealed without attuning our ears to listening to different stories. By listening, we are better able to provide what may be needed to create and maintain such discursive spaces and support the opening of avenues to new knowledge and political possibilities. It is through listening to the nuances and complexities of women's discursive resistance; complexities that sometimes seem 'mundane,' we are better positioned to propose liberatory changes for policy and practice (McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2014).

Rethinking Secularism

In chapter VI of this thesis, I have reflected on the narratives these women drew on when talking about themselves, their ideologies and political reflections. I have argued that secular Muslim women activists in Britain and France, are locked in a narrow range of roles and positions, which are widely misunderstood by different groups. In the literature review, I have presented how both 'secular' and 'religious' feminisms among women of Muslim backgrounds represented the 'other' as unitary and static, devoid of complexity, struggle and change. This identification hinders mutual understanding between secular and religious women and undermines the potential for joint strategic political alliances in the fight for gender equality. While evidence of joint mobilization between secular and religious

women around common causes have begun to appear within transnational spaces like *Women Living Under Muslim Laws* amongst a few organizations, the women interviewed for this thesis represent a different type of 'secular' women than those who remained dismissive of some Islamic feminists calling for the opening of new readings and interpretations of religious texts. The women whose stories are recounted here shared a common vision that asserts women's rights to contest manifestations of religion, culture, traditions and norms and challenge leaderships that claim to represent them. They do not oppose religion *per se*. Rather, they emphasise the crucial role of secular spaces in ensuring equality for people of all religions and of none. Yet, they refuse to treat faith-based feminism as the only legitimate form of indigenous feminism in Muslim societies.

But because secularism is seen as a Western imposition that belittles and marginalises not only religions but local cultural and moral values, the viability of these ideologies is questioned. My objective in this section is not to analyse secular debates that modern Western nations currently witness, rather, to recover the particular meaning and application of secularism as a modern discourse within a transnational setting, where religion is intricately linked to lived experiences, especially in the light of the rise of religious movements. How can we accommodate religion yet be able to comprehend the symbolic meanings of secular practices, whereas the very meaning of secularisation implies a strict separation between state and religion? First of all, as emphasised in the introduction of this thesis, the notion that there exists an original definition of secularism needs to be treated with caution, because while the concept has its historical roots in the West, its translation into transnational contexts is producing new suggestions. The presence of religious markers in all their complexities in modern multi-cultural multi-faith societies makes the division between religion and secularism a difficult task (Mir, 2002).

The argument about a reconciliation of Islam and secularism was sparked in the late 1980s with the clashes that followed the publication of Salman Rushdie's novel by *Women Against Fundamentalism*, a feminist anti-racist and anti-fundamentalist organization that was established in London in 1989, who were first to emphasise the crucial role of secular spaces in ensuring equality for all people (Dhaliwal, 2014). Their argument was supported by Homi

Bhaba (1995) who defends the normative importance of secularism as enabling and protecting the changeability of religions over time and the multiple forms of religious practices that develop with the movement of populations within and across countries. Drawing on a 'version' of secularism that comes from the 'historical and cultural experiences of migration, diaspora, resettlement that defines the minority of multicultural existence' today, he conceptualizes what he calls 'subaltern secularism,' that 'emerges from the limitations of "liberal" secularism and "keeps faith" with those communities and individuals who have been denied and excluded from egalitarian and tolerant values of liberal individualism' (p. 6). Drawing on Gita Sahgal's work on the experiences of Asian women organizing in Britain, he uses the notion of 'the subaltern' to refer to the oppressed minority groups, which are vexing to challenge the authority of those who have hegemonic power. In his view, women of religious minority groups 'are caught in the cross-fire of a multi-faith, multicultural society, where, invariably, the shots are called by the male members of the community who become the recognizable representatives of the "community" in the public sphere' (ibid). Therefore, they do not have the choice and freedom upon which liberal notions of secularism are based, but, as Gita Sahgal (2000) argues, are in need of secular spaces to ensure choice and ethics of coexistence.

To define the secular perspective as simply 'non-religious' is to miss the great power of women like the ones whose stories are recounted in this thesis, who despite not being engaged in theological arguments, base their activism within a standpoint that is concerned with the cultural and political effect that religions exert upon social acts. These women's position is not of a cultural relativist or an apologist. It does not celebrate the wearing of the *hijab* as a form of 'empowerment,' neither does it strongly condemn its forcible removal. Women like Sara, Nadia and the others demand such 'secular' spaces; spaces which consider their particular historical and cultural experiences that define their very existence, spaces which allow them the freedom of choice that is not presupposed or prescribed, spaces that can be shared with 'others,' and 'from which solidarity is not simply based on similarity, but on the recognition of difference (Bhabha, 1995, p. 7). In this sense, 'secularism' would still

call for the separation of religion and state yet gives equal respect for everyone's human rights, so that no one is either advantaged (or disadvantaged) on account of their beliefs.

PRACTISING SOLIDARITY

As I have already argued, despite that these women activists inhabit different and unequal worlds, they are bound together by a shared intellectual and political agenda and by a desire to adopt a new vision, even if this vision is being contested and challenged. The perceived competition between these women over resources and opportunities, however, has resulted in an anticipated lack of cooperation among them. As evident in chapter VII, these women are constantly under attack and sometimes attack one another in their attempts to gain legitimacy and secure resources. Each of these women ended up founding her own organization, yet, all of them aspired to create a movement that brings together different secular discourses in forms that attend to better women's lives. This is particularly dangerous as these women activists are still in the process of finding structures and ways of organizing to accommodate difference and absorb conflict, but also allow for a continuation of activities (Al-Ali, 2000). After all, if they acknowledge differences rather than commonalities, on what basis can solidarity be possible?

In this thesis, each of the stories recounted stands comfortably alone, both as a story and as a testament to the journey of the woman who inhabits it. Each story provides a particular history, not only of the narrator but also of the issues that concern her. But, as these women recounted their stories, the similarities of their struggles became apparent. Within the narratives of these women, some discourses emerged. They all emphasised a focus on women's issues. They all acknowledged the 'struggles' that women experience in their everyday life. They all pointed out to anger as a principal motivator underlying their thinking and their actions. They all felt 'alone' or 'unique' in their identification of a problem. And they all believed in their capacity and 'responsibility' to 'stick their head out,' and call for social justice. Each, thus, resonated with a discourse of sameness and dynamics of empathy. These small acts of solidarity, which they themselves may have not seen clearly,

are central to the sustainability of their activism. Clare Hemmings (2012) develops a concept of 'affective solidarity, which she explains as necessary for 'sustainable feminist politics of transformation' (p. 147). I find this concept particularly useful to identify these seemingly obscured forms of solidarity. In efforts to move away from rooting feminist transformation in the politics of identity, Clare Hemmings proposes drawing on a broad range of affects, such as rage, frustration and the desire for connection as ways of focusing on modes of engagement that start from the 'affective dissonance' that feminist politics begin from (p. 148). It is how we move from 'affective dissonance' to affective solidarity' that concerns her.

> I want to argue that this affective dissonance is central to feminism and can be theorized as the basis of a connection to others and desire for transformation not rooted in identity, yet thoroughly cognisant of power and privilege. I start from the mechanism of that impulse to change, from how it feels to experience the gaps between self-narration and social reality.

In this article, Clare Hemmings looks at politics that start from various affective experiences without generalising them as shared by all women. She, thus, centres affective dissonance as a basis for 'possible' feminist solidarity. In that sense, dissonance has to arise if feminist politics is to emerge. It is the basis from which women may seek solidarity with each other, rather than identity, ideology or both. If the women whose stories are recounted here succeed in recognizing not only differences based on ideology and identity but also commonalities based on 'having had enough,' 'being sick and tired' of no one doing anything, having the desire for transformation out of experiences of discomfort 'and against the odds' (Hemmings, 2012, p. 158), they may be able to develop mutual consideration and understanding despite their differing perspectives and experiences. This, in turn may assist them in becoming better able to strengthen the grounds for a shared political struggle. By collectively struggling to understand these different experiences, it becomes possible to recognize one's own positionality, which can spark solidarity 'premised not on a false idea of homogeneity ... but on the shared knowledge of each other' (Bassel, 2017, p. 28). In other words, difference is not the enemy of solidarity but the foundation for building collective identity. Solidarity and sameness are not the same thing. As Audre Lorde (1984) says in *Sister Outsider*: 'You do not have to be me ... for us to fight alongside each other' (p. 142).

CONCLUDING REMARKS: CAUGHT BETWEEN TWO EVILS

In her book *It was Like a Fever*, Francesca Polletta (2006) brings together two interests of my own research: narrative and activism, by revitalising and reconceptualising the relationship between them. One of her two central arguments asserts that stories can fail to mobilise just as easily as they can succeed to do so. Her second point, stemming from the first, claims that success and failure spring from the storytelling context: 'who tells them, when, for what purpose and in what setting' (p. 3). Among the central tenets of narrative that she reviews are how shifting points of view can expose or conceal authority, how individual and group identities are forged, and how familiar plots and characters tend to lead to normative conclusions. But the aspect of narrative theory that most captures her interest is its ambiguity; its openness to interpretation. Storytelling is riddled with contrary beliefs. On one hand, we believe stories are unique and particular, told by uncommon people or by common people in extraordinary circumstances. On the other, we know that stories are ubiquitous and told by everyone. In the end, she claims that the ambiguity and ambivalence that she identifies as central to narrative and activism must be embraced rather than overcome.

Some believe that by defining some ethnic practices as oppressive, the women whose narratives are recounted here neglect the right of ethnic Muslim minorities to live their cultures to the full. It is in the name of respect and tolerance of 'other' cultures that some (like the ultra-left and some feminists) demand these women 'not' to oppose practices that are against fundamental human rights, such as 'honour' crimes, forced marriages and domestic violence. Others (like the far-right and new atheists) argue that by refusing to condemn 'all' practices, these women give a chance to radical ideologies to obliterate the basis of western secularism. They believe that these 'other' cultures are 'inherently violent' and anti-women, instead of understanding that, like everywhere, it is specific individuals and specific groups that are violent or anti-women. These women, however, are siding with neither camp. They do not want to deny Muslim women the route to a full western culture (if they choose so). Yet they neither disapprove nor celebrate those deciding to choose their

own ethnic and religious cultures over western ones. It is in this sense that these women find themselves caught between two poles compelled to walk a tightrope to offset them both. In this current atmosphere, numerous ideological confusions prevail, among which, the most harmful to secular Muslim women battling religious fundamentalism, is the confusion between defending fundamental rights for 'all' which they call for and perceiving Muslim fundamentalists as legitimate representatives of all Muslim women. By taking this position, these women suffer, not just alienation and punishment from within their own culture, but a very loud silence from those of who are terrified that by speaking out they may be dubbed Islamophobic. This is what Ali Rizvi (2016) calls 'Islamophobia-phobia. Such achievements, however, continue to be conditional on the existence of what Nancy Fraser (1990) calls a 'subaltern counterpublic.' Coining the term from Gayatri Spivak's (1993) 'subaltern' and Rita Felski's (1989) 'counterpublics,' she argues that counterpublics are formed as a response to the exclusions of the dominant publics. This counterpublic would permit women like the ones whose stories are recounted here 'to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs' (p. 291). With the latter contestations continue to exist, further questions arise; how could these women successfully create counterpublics and 'who' decides 'who' the subaltern is.

Limitations

In this thesis, I have approached the narratives of these women with what Ruthellen Josselson (2004) terms 'the interpretation of faith.' By this, I mean that I am privileging the voice of the storyteller to understand the subjective and the social and historical world they inhabit, without offering judgement or critique of the positions they chose to take. I cannot claim to have produced an absolute knowledge of these women's activism, yet, I hope to have been able to interpret their accounts the way they would have wished, knowing that it cannot fully encompass the many ways their identities and ideologies play out and are felt in complex lives. In my engagement with these narratives, I have highlighted points of convergence and divergence to demonstrate what I pointed out earlier, that research is

always a process of co-construction that requires a reflexive approach to ensure validity and rigour. Researching and writing are political endeavours (Ahmed, 2017; Guest, 2016) that cannot be considered neutral. Here, as part of this process of reflexivity, I would like to point out that in approaching research as a story-telling practice, in reading and interpreting other people's stories, we create and tell stories of our own, stories that may not be extensive, yet are able to destabilise hegemonic accounts of women's history and rethink their relationship to this history. Intrinsically, there is never any research with a final end-point, as data, which appears to stay constant, changes its meaning over time, just as we ourselves come to see new and different aspects of our research.

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