



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Narratives of South Asian women in Leicester 1964 - 2004

Citation for published version:

Rodger, R & Herbert, J 2008, 'Narratives of South Asian women in Leicester 1964 - 2004' Oral History, vol 36, no. 2, pp. 554-563.

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

Oral History

Publisher Rights Statement:

© Rodger, R., & Herbert, J. (2008). Narratives of South Asian women in Leicester 1964 - 2004. Oral History, 36(2), 554-563.

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



NARRATIVES OF SOUTH ASIAN MUSLIM WOMEN IN LEICESTER 1964-2004¹

by Joanna Herbert and Richard Rodger

ABSTRACT

KEY WORDS:
Narratives,
cross-cultural
interview,
Islamophobia,
South Asian
Muslims

This article draws on interviews with South Asian Muslim women and explores the narratives of suffering, which were used to articulate their gendered experiences of growing up in the household and their encounters with Islamophobia following September 11th. It is argued that, in the process of analysis, it is important to attend to other features of the narrative, such as the trajectory of the life story, to highlight moments of negotiation and agency, to contextualise the interviews with secondary sources, and to reflect on the role of the interview relationships. This helps to avoid reproducing misunderstandings about South Asian Muslims and ultimately challenges stereotypes that Muslim women are helpless victims or that Muslims are self-segregating.

INTRODUCTION

Oral history has proved to be a key tool for research on the histories of migrant groups and there is now a significant body of literature which draws on oral sources to explore the complexities and nuances of migrant experiences, mentalities and identities.² More recently, academics have paid increasing attention to the role of narratives in migrant oral histories and have become interested in the stories that migrants tell, not just in terms of the content but in the ways in which these stories are told.³ Thus, there is an increased awareness of how narratives are composed in terms of structure and form, including how certain characters are portrayed and how events are reordered into a plot. The development of the plot over time then results in a transformation, such as a change in the teller's fortunes.⁴ Attention has also focused on genres which refer to a type of narration that has particular conventions and expectations and help signal how the listener

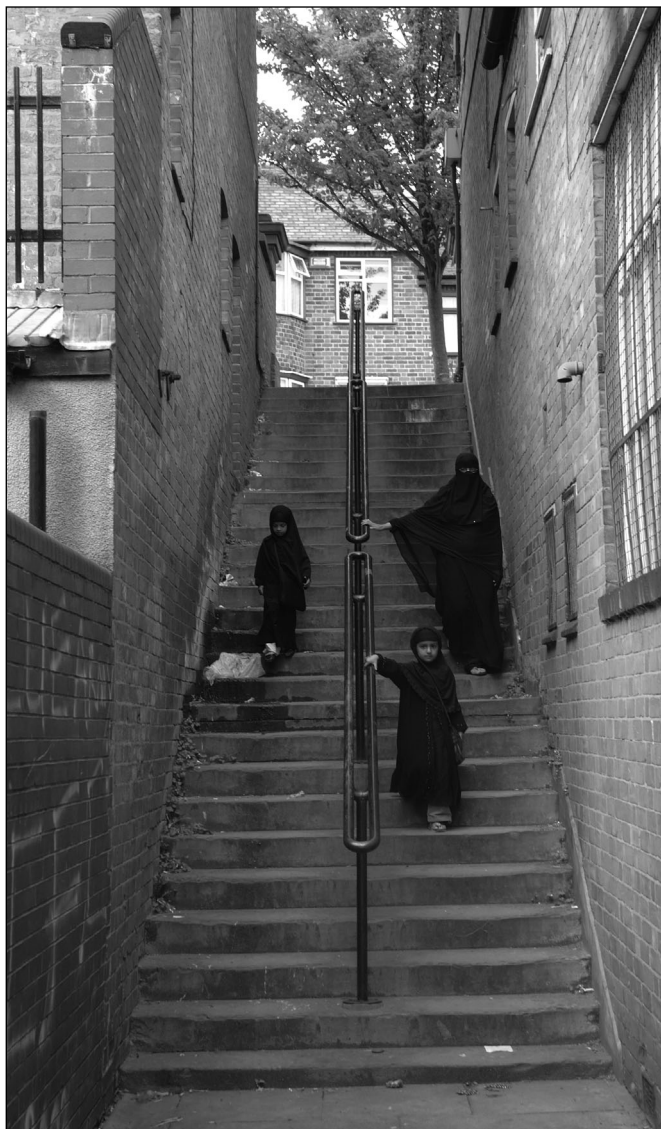
should interpret the story.⁵ Influenced by Tonkin's work on genres, there is a greater awareness and understanding of how narratives are constructed according to a particular, formalised way of talking about the past, of the need to attend to the rhetorical skills of the interviewee and to view the act of narration as a 'purposeful social action.'⁶

Whilst the decoding of meanings and messages within the interview may be unconscious if the narrator and interviewer are from the same background, if the interview is cross-cultural the listener will need to learn 'how to listen.' The rise to success through stoic hard work and the pioneering adventurer are familiar migrant stories yet they are also typical male narratives.⁷ It is, therefore, important to attend to the narrative genres used by women migrants, as Portelli has observed, because narratives are constructed in gendered ways and women may draw on story forms that are less well known.⁸

The narratives through which the Muslim women told their life stories was one of suffering, both as a woman in their personal lives and as a Muslim within public spaces. Taking these themes, allows us to reflect on both the advantages of employing a narrative approach and the implications for the interpretation of interviews. Yet it also allows us to gain a deeper understanding into how the women express and evaluate living in Britain and to glean an insight into experiences that are relatively unexplored. Not only does gender continue to be sidelined within mainstream immigration studies but where research on South Asians does incorporate women, it tends to categorise women as the 'followers' who joined their husbands in the family reunification phase and made important contributions to the community building process.⁹ Whilst women's experiences within the household has received academic attention, this has tended to focus on decision making within the migratory process and less so on the women's memories of their socialisation within the household.¹⁰ This reflects the scope of previous research on South Asians which has tended to focus on either the first generation elders or on the second and third generation youths, rather than those who had migrated to Britain as children, attended secondary school in Britain, and constituted a 'half-way' generation.¹¹ Previous research has also concentrated on South Asian Muslim women within the sphere of employment, education, or their religious and cultural identities, but explorations of their spatial experiences within particular localities, is more limited.¹² However, as Sibley has argued, exclusions within social space are unnoticed and yet routinely experienced by minority ethnic groups and it is imperative for scholars to expose and make visible these social practices, particularly to dominant groups, such as white middle class males.¹³

SCOPE OF THE RESEARCH

The research was conducted by Herbert and draws on ten in-depth life story interviews conducted in 2004 and builds on a larger research project on South Asian migration to Leicester which included over fifty five interviews from original interviews and existing archives.¹⁴ The problems of a white scholar researching minority ethnic groups came to the fore in the 1980s when 'race relations' research was heavily criticised for reproducing stereotypes of subordinate groups, perpetuating the view that minority groups were a problem and were blamed for 'prying into the black community'.¹⁵ Post-colonial critiques have also questioned the authority of western scholars to speak on behalf of other cultures.¹⁶ Further-



more, the structural inequality that exists between scholars and minority groups has led to the romanticizing of marginalised groups. Consequently South Asian women have either been celebrated for their successes or cultural 'difference' or presented as downtrodden victims to be pitied.¹⁷ More recently, scholars have contended that interviews with an 'insider' or 'outsider' produce different types of knowledge; neither is superior, yet it is crucial to attend to how the social location of the interviewer may shape the interview.¹⁸ A narrative approach alerts us to this process of construction, by reminding us that the interview is always a performance and a process. It can, therefore, help to avoid the pitfalls of stereotyping.

Spinney Hills, Highfields. The photographs in this article are reproduced by permission of Ben Ravilius.

The participants were identified through local contacts. This helped to overcome some of the potential difficulties that an 'outsider' may encounter, such as suspicion from the respondents. The interview process has been discussed in-depth elsewhere but it is worth reiterating the significant influence that the contacts have on the research.¹⁹ In this case the contacts had worked in the local area for over twenty years, had formed networks with a wide range of people, and were not Muslim themselves. There was no implicit or explicit expectation to interview women from a particular Muslim background. Hence, male community elders who would have a vested interest in portraying a certain view of 'their community' were generally avoided. The contacts used were vital in establishing a degree of mutual trust between the respondents and interviewer and the women generally talked at ease, although one woman felt more comfortable with her colleague present during the interview and another respondent was interviewed alongside her husband.

All the women worked, or had been employed outside the household; one had attended university, and seven of the ten respondents were married with children. Only one respondent lived with an extended family, although the majority of the other women had lived in an extended household at some point in their life. Whilst Islam was one element of their identity, there were many other aspects of differentiation such as country of origin (which included India, Bangladesh, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe), regional and linguistic backgrounds, social class, ethnicity, age, occupation, different familial traditions, and timing of arrival into Britain, although the majority had migrated to Britain in the 1970s and 1980s.²⁰ Added to this, were different doctrinal traditions and styles of dress. During the interview, some women were clothed in an ankle length gown; others wore a headscarf, whilst several women chose not to wear the hijab and were dressed in western clothes. The women's reasons for choosing their dress style were also diverse and were often discussed as part of constructing a Muslim identity in Britain. Whilst pressure from in-laws was also mentioned, this was downplayed in their narratives and the women typically emphasised their personal motivations. Overall, the differences rather than the commonalities were most conspicuous, defying any presumptions that there was a single Muslim culture, community or identity.

THE SETTING

Leicester is a medium sized Midland city of around 280,000 people and is home to many diverse minority ethnic communities.²¹ The

growth of the South Asian population radically transformed Leicester's ethnic profile, particularly between 1968 and 1978 when some 20,000 East African Asians arrived from Kenya, Tanzania, Malawi and Uganda.²² Their migration was due to growing Africanisation programmes whereby governments sought to eradicate the economic dominance of Asians that had developed under British rule. The city council responded to this influx of South Asians by advising Ugandan Asians to stay away from the city through an advert in the *Ugandan Argos* in 1972, and as a result the city was infamously branded the most 'unwelcoming' in Britain. However, since the 1980s the city council has pursued multicultural policies and promoted and celebrated ethnic diversity; following the riots of 2001 in English northern industrial cities, Leicester received international attention and was hailed as a model of multi-cultural success.

Leicester has become one of Britain's main 'Asian' cities, but because it has a Hindu population of 41,250 – the second largest in England and Wales – it is primarily regarded as a Hindu city.²³ Nevertheless, during the last twenty years the Muslim population of Leicester has been the fastest growing religious community. From 1983 to 2001 the rate of increase of Muslims as a percentage of the total population (6.4 per cent) was significantly higher than that of Hindus (0.8 per cent) and by 2001, Leicester's Muslim population numbered 31,000, the tenth largest in England and Wales.²⁴ In contrast to other South Asian Muslim populations in Britain, who originate from Pakistan and Bangladesh, most South Asian Muslims in Leicester are from a Gujarat background.²⁵ More recently, the city has witnessed the arrival of Muslim refugees particularly Kosovans and Somalis who had fled from civil war.²⁶

The interviews took place in an inner city area known as Highfields. Housing in Highfields is mainly composed of large Victorian houses and redbrick terraces, and following post-war neglect, the area was generally deemed as undesirable by the white population.²⁷ The area has been home to earlier generations of settlers including eastern Europeans, Irish and African Caribbeans, and although there has been some evidence of suburbanisation by South Asians since the 1990s, most notably amongst Indians and East African Asians, Highfields has emerged into a distinctive and self-contained Muslim area.²⁸ The Muslim identity of Highfields is striking. As one journalist observed: 'From the minute you walk into Highfields, it's impossible not to notice that Islam is the thread which binds the community together.' 'It is possible', the journalist

commented, 'to walk the streets of Highfields for hours and never see a white face. The shops, from confectioners to drapers and butchers are all Asian and predominantly Muslim.'²⁹

NARRATIVES: SUFFERING AS A WOMAN

Whilst South Asian men presented themselves as the heroes who worked hard and struggled against the harsh working conditions or succeeded due to their autonomy and pioneering spirit, the women's narratives were distinct.³⁰ That is, they drew on a narrative of suffering, which involved creating a survivor subject position and unlike the men's stories, was not based on the public sphere of the workplace, but centred on their private lives. This was not unique to the Muslim respondents but cut across religious differences and underpinned many of the South Asian women's stories. The women's narratives typically focused on very personal stories which included struggles growing up, a pressure to marry, conflicts with in-laws, coping with the death of a loved one, and an unhappy marriage. For example, the women often recounted how, as an adolescent, they contended with their parents gendered expectations which attempted to define appropriate behaviour and monitor their conduct. Munisa, for instance, conveyed the sense of burden and frustration she felt by stressing how her life was constrained by gender roles, and by contrasting her obligations within the household with the freedom permitted to her brothers. She explained:

I felt because I was the only girl I felt my brothers were spoilt. My mum and dad thoroughly spoilt them and she just ran around with them you know. I mean I did everything for them; they used to come from school, throw their things, their satchel and their shoes around you know you were forever picking things up. They used to have their tea, you know in the kitchen they would go and make themselves, or my mum would make tea for them and all that and literally everything was in a mess you know and they could just leave it and go out to play, we would you know my mum and I would cook for them and all that. And so I was, in spite of all that, helping in the shop and helping my mum who lived very strict, I remember my mum; my dad would not let me go out anywhere.³¹

From the outset, Munisa presents herself as disadvantaged in the household solely because of her gender. Her story continued with the



familiar episode of the pivotal moment when she was informed by her parents that she was expected to marry:

Spinney Hills, Highfields (Ben Ravilious).

My mum and dad called me in the front room and they said that 'You are now getting old, you are nearly 17 and we're going to marry you off, and here is, you know, we would like you to marry him' and he showed me the photograph and do you know what? I just looked at the photograph and threw it on the floor. And then my dad said, 'You do as you're told, you are my...' in those days we sort of said 'you are my izzat', a girl, a daughter is supposed to be an izzat, that means you can't, and you know you are my proud, pride.

I know, yes.



Spinney Hills,
Highfields (Ben
Ravilius).

Yes. You know the word izzat? You are my pride you cannot do anything wrong because I have to live in the community, I have to face everybody. So just think how much pressure I had to live with. And so what I did, I remember the words so very, very vividly and I remember saying 'Do what you want.' And I walked out.³²

The reference to izzat (honour) demonstrates the pressures she felt, specifically as a 'girl' and as a 'daughter' because her actions were not only accountable to her family but to the wider 'community.' Versions of this experience were retold by many of the South Asian women who also typically described at great length the difficulties involved in meeting their proposed husband at the airport, their initial reactions and feelings towards him, their wedding day and their consequent new role as

a daughter-in-law.

These extracts of both daily routines and dramatic, life changing events, offer a glimpse into an otherwise hidden realm of family relations and illustrate how gender, ethnicity and age intersected within their daily lives. Yet there is a danger of viewing the women as passive victims whereby a series of unfortunate events simply happened to them or reproducing particular stereotypes such as the Muslim home as an oppressive arena or South Asian marriages as forced marriages. Narrative analysis however reminds us that the stories take the viewpoint of the teller that the teller may present themselves as a victim to provoke sympathy from the audience, and that individuals may be stereotyped as villains, or presented as extremes. Literature on South Asians has revealed that parents were not simply oppressive but, as migrants, wanted to protect their children from what was typically perceived to be a threatening English culture.³³ In addition, research with first generation South Asian elders reveals the lengthy planning process of from two to five years to arrange a marriage, the immense pressures experienced by the parents, and the process of negotiation which is lost in quotes which focus on the single day.³⁴ For example, whilst Munisa's narrative dwelled on her parents' demands in great depth, she also mentioned that she ultimately chose to go ahead with the marriage and in exchange her parents permitted her to study for a teaching qualification. She possessed some leverage to negotiate her own requirements.

Narrative analysis encourages us to examine the whole life story and this reveals that, whilst the women may have used suffering as a cultural script to frame and interpret their experiences, they also stressed moments that highlighted their own agency. For instance, several women commented that whilst their marriage was initially difficult for them, they had persuaded their husband to accept their views or modify his behaviour over time, and thereby had gained more authority in the household. Hasina, for example, introduced her husband into her life story by stating 'he came over from Malawi. He's a little bit more old fashioned than I am, there's some things that he's not been comfortable with.'³⁵ She then described how he gradually began to listen to her opinions regarding their son's behaviour and she concluded, 'I started working, I found that my husband was a lot more accepting and he started listening to me more, I think that made a difference in our relationship and he's actually turned out to be more broadminded than I thought because he does all the housework (laughs).'³⁶ These moments revealed how they were involved in a

process of negotiation within the household and were successful in creating changes to their lives to improve and fortify their position. Overall, the trajectory of these narratives did not follow that of a tragedy and a slide from good to bad, but rather the women emphasised how their lives had gradually improved, and they presented themselves as survivors who overcame these problems. The women often ended their narratives by explicitly stating their strength. Again, this is exemplified by Munisa:

Sometimes I also think how I coped with that, I don't know how I coped. I'm sitting here talking about that one and I'm thinking... I'm really shivering inside you know say, 'How did I manage all that?' but I don't know I must have had a strength from somewhere to do that.³⁷

This reveals the importance of examining the temporal order of the story and reveals the role of narratives in affirming self-identity. As Roberts states: 'The story is one's identity, a story created, told, revised and retold throughout life. We know or discover ourselves and reveal ourselves to others, by the stories we tell.'³⁸ Thus, the narrative of suffering which revealed their hardships and problems ultimately served to underline their resourcefulness and endurance as women and secured their self identity in the present, as strong women.

SUFFERING AS A MUSLIM

Whilst the theme of suffering within their private lives was expressed by all South Asian women, the Muslim women's narratives focused on another form of suffering that the Sikh and Hindu women did not share: experiences of Islamophobia in the aftermath of 9/11. Unlike their stories of suffering as women, the problem of anti-Muslim hostility had not been reconciled and remained a predominant concern in their current daily lives. For some Muslim women, encounters with Islamophobia dominated their stories, but more typically it was interwoven with the stories of their personal struggles. Sameeha explained how the city centre had become a site of white hostility for her, following September 11th. In particular, she relayed in detail one incident and returned to it many times in her narrative:

I don't go to town anymore because we went to town and because my husband has got a beard they started saying 'Bin Laden' every time. One day someone said to him 'oh are you all right Bin Laden?' he said 'yes' and they said 'f off and f this' they started swearing and there was just him me

and my two young ones and I was actually frightened for them and myself. I thought there's nine youths and they could do something so I said 'Let's just go away they're not worth it.' We stopped going into town and we don't go into town anymore. I may go there once a year if I need anything 'cause I use the directory now, I just buy my clothes from there, but it's frightening for me, I don't go anywhere.³⁹

In this instance her husband was the target of abuse, but Sameeha's narrative focuses on the impact it had on her life; that is, her exclusion from town. Her sense of suffering and also helplessness was often expressed directly. She commented: 'I feel sometimes, because of our skin colour we're going to get it all the time anyway.' Later she added, 'I guess because it's visible that I'm a Muslim I will be suffering I think. Suffering in silence to be honest.'⁴⁰

Other women's narratives focused on less explicit forms of Islamophobia, although the consequences were the same – an exclusion from particular spaces. Nasiha explained: 'I've only been wearing the scarf now for two years and I went to town once after the first week of wearing the scarf and I went in a few shops and I got treated so differently.'⁴¹ She stressed the reaction of the shop assistants in certain department stores,

They give you that look. 'Well hold on you're not meant to be in here' and they can't really come up to you and say it to you 'oh you're not really meant to be in here,' but they give you that look, they look you top to bottom and think 'you've got a scarf on', or 'you shouldn't be shopping in our shop, we don't store your type of clothes.' And they follow you around and you get so angry that you just walk out. Most of the time I do, I do walk out and I think well I'll spend my money somewhere else but you do get looked at differently, I think, since September 11th. They do look at you differently.⁴²

For Nasiha the disapproving look served as a subtle form of exclusion. It was an unequivocal message that Muslims did not belong to that space and her Muslim attire signified that she was 'out of place.'⁴³ Nasiha recalled various settings where she encountered suspicious looks, including in the villages on the outskirts of Leicester and at East Midlands Airport where, she stressed, 'you just got looked at. They don't need to say it to you but it's the way they look at you, the whispers, the body language.'⁴⁴ For these women, Islamophobia

was not simply confined to overt racial abuse, but was also evident in more subtle guises to which they became attuned. This was reinforced by Naeema: 'it's the undercurrents, it's underneath. It's underneath the smiles, the politeness and all that.'⁴⁵

By providing detailed descriptions of these experiences and emphasizing this theme within their life stories, the women portrayed the distinct sense that these incidents were not easily dismissed as inconsequential; rather they provoked considerable unease and anxiety and had a pervasive impact on their lives. The experiences of exclusionary practices such as name calling or hostile looks, offers an insight into the strategies that dominant groups adopt to construct physical and symbolic boundaries between themselves and threatening 'others' and so secure the 'whiteness' of certain spaces. Whilst research in other cities has noted the role of violence in limiting the social mobility of other ethnic groups, some white people in Leicester used more subtle strategies to maintain boundaries, strategies which go unnoticed by the white majority but secured the Muslim women's exclusion from particular spaces.⁴⁶ The city of Leicester is known for its tolerance towards minority ethnic groups yet September 11th can be seen as creating a racist panic which heightened the desire to keep Muslims at a distance and maintain boundaries between 'us' and 'them.' According to Sibley moral panics express beliefs about belonging and not belonging, and for the female respondents the hostility they experienced in the city, albeit subtle and often covert, made them realise that their belonging in Britain was essentially conditional.⁴⁷ In essence, their exclusion from spaces beyond Highfields symbolised their exclusion from the nation.⁴⁸ This was articulated by Nasiha,

I think when you're in your own community or out and about in Highfields, or Evington it's fine, but you go into certain shops in town, it's mostly in town [...] you go into the city centre and these people think 'Okay, right are they meant to be here?' And you think God I've been bought up here, I call myself a British Bangladeshi but I'm not at the end of the day if this is how they treat you.⁴⁹

INTERPRETING NARRATIVES

The interviews highlight the strengths of oral history to reveal worlds otherwise hidden from other ethnic and religious groups. However, because the women emphasised their suffering within their stories there is a danger in assuming that they were simply helpless victims or of

reproducing common misunderstandings and stereotypes about South Asian Muslims. A narrative analysis however highlights that whilst suffering was used as a cultural script to frame their stories, there were other narrative features which indicated how the stories should be interpreted including the temporal order, the trajectory of the life story, and the moments of negotiation and agency. Critiques of narrative approaches have highlighted how narrative analysis can lead to a narrow focus of study or can reduce lives to fiction, in which the form becomes the focus of study rather than experiences, however, contextualising the interviews with secondary sources helps to avoid these limitations.⁵⁰ For example, whilst the women's narratives inferred that their parents were 'negative' characters, even aggressors, who should be blamed, the literature on South Asians helps alert us to the concerns and priorities of first generation migrants and provides a historical and social context for the interviews.

A narrative analysis directs attention not just to what is told but why the story is told. Gardner identified the theme of suffering used by Bengali Muslim women in East London and suggested that they may have focused on this because it reaffirmed their role as the suffering wife and offered a means to enhance their respect and status.⁵¹ That is, suffering is one way through which Muslim women can gain honour. Arguably, this may apply to the Muslim women in Leicester in that, as Thompson and Chamberlain have argued, they drew on a genre that was culturally acceptable and available to them, but overall their stories emphasised their strength in spite of the difficulties.⁵² Moreover, whilst it is important to attend to the influence of specific cultural genres, these alone cannot explain the stories. As oral historians have long recognised, the interaction between the teller and the audience is also a vital part of narratives and the cross-cultural context of the interview, coupled with the women's present day concerns, cannot be ignored. Whilst it is important to recognise the fluid and multi-faceted nature of identities, the interviewer's social location as essentially an 'outsider' inevitably influenced the type of stories the respondents decided to tell.

Arguably, the interviewer's white ethnicity enabled the women to criticise aspects of their culture without fear of judgement, such as how discourses of shame and honour constrained their behaviour whilst they were growing up in Britain.⁵³ The women's narratives of suffering as a Muslim needs to be considered in the context of various global events such as the Rushdie affair, the Gulf war, September 11, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the bomb-



The Clerics Cricket Match, Grace Road 9 November 2006 (Ben Ravilious).

ings in London whereby Muslims throughout Europe have been cast as self-selecting outsiders, stereotyped as ‘fundamentalists’ and demonised and feared as the ‘enemy within.’⁵⁴ Muslims continue to feel embattled and besieged, and the stigmatisation of Muslims remains a pre-eminent concern. Considering this perhaps the women chose to emphasise their experiences of Islamophobia to try to convey to an English person the extent to which anti-Muslim sentiment impinged on their lives, in terms both of their restrictions in public space and also in relation to their ambivalence about their sense of belonging in Britain. Indeed, the consequent feelings of anxiety and fear that the women routinely endured was shocking, particularly considering the dominant discourse of Leicester which celebrates the city’s multi-cultural success.⁵⁵ Moreover, the women’s stories ultimately challenged stereotypes that white people may possess. Firstly, that Muslim women are disempowered victims, oppressed by their religious and ethnic cultures and, secondly, that the residential segregation

of Muslims is a sign of their self-segregation and lack of integration which is then blamed for undermining integration and threatening social cohesion.⁵⁶ It was clear from the interviews that the women valued Highfields because it represented a place of safety in contrast to other parts of the city where they felt threatened and unwelcome.

CONCLUSION

This article has revealed how narratives reflect experiences, serve as cultural scripts and reaffirm identities. It has also been argued that a narrative analysis helps to avoid simplistic interpretations and that if we do not attend to the narrative structure of oral histories, there is a danger in seeing particular types of stories as inherent ‘truths’ rather than as genres that are used to frame and best articulate experiences and viewpoints. A narrative approach can be seen as particularly useful for explorations of the experiences of South Asian Muslim women in that it prioritises the perspective of the teller and helps to restore their agency since they are

activity engaged in the process of interpreting and evaluating their lives. This is most important considering previous research has been criticised for reducing South Asian Muslim women to the 'objects' of the research.⁵⁷ Finally, and more generally, attention to narratives is invaluable to cross-cultural research; it

enables us to go beyond the dichotomy of migrants as either victims or successes, and to understand more fully the complexities and contradictions involved in living in Britain. In so doing, it ensures that the rhetorical power and messages embedded in migrants' stories are not lost.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research for this paper was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council Postdoctoral Fellowship (grant no: 026-27-268). Many thanks to the women who were willing to take part in the research and tell their stories.

NOTES

1. This paper forms part of the Research Project on 'The History and Culture of Multiracial Leicester' in co-operation with Professor Kiyotaka Sato, Professor Tetsumi Kato and Cynthia Brown. The authors gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Meiji University International Exchange Programs Fund.
2. The literature is too extensive to list here, but for a recent overview see Mary Chamberlain and Selma Leydesdorff, 'Transnational families, memories and narratives', *Global Networks*, vol 4, no 3, 2004, pp 227-41.
3. See for example, Marilyn Barber, 'Hearing women's voices: female migration to Canada in the early twentieth century', *Oral History*, vol 33, no 1, 2005, pp 73-6.
4. For more details on the structure and defining features of narratives see Roberto Franzosi, 'Narrative analysis – or why (and how) sociologists should be interested in narrative', *Annual Review Sociology*, vol 24, no 1, 1998, pp 517-54.
5. For the meanings of genre see Mary Chamberlain and Paul Thompson, 'Introduction: Genre and narrative in life stories', in Mary Chamberlain and Paul Thompson, (eds), *Narrative and Genre*, London: Routledge, 1998.
6. Elizabeth Tonkin, *Narrating Our Pasts: The Social Construction of History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, p 3.
7. See for instance, Pnina Werbner, 'Rich man poor man - or a community of suffering', *Oral History*, vol 8, 1980, pp 43-8.
8. Alessandro Portelli, 'Oral history as genre', in Chamberlain and Thompson, 1998, p 28. Portelli contrasts the 'hospital tales' used by women, with the 'war stories' told by men.
9. Sarah Mahler and Patricia Pessar, 'Gender matters: ethnographers bring gender form the periphery towards the core of migration studies', *International Migration Review*, vol 40, no 1, 2006, p 28, Dhooleka Raj, *Where Are You From? Middle Class Migrants in the Modern World*, Berkeley: University of California Press,

2003, p 42.

10. See for example, Annie Phizacklea 'Gender and transnational labour migration', in Rohit Barot, Harriet Bradley and Steve Fenton (eds), *Ethnicity, Gender and Social Change*, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999. The influence of women's employment on household relations has also been a key area of research. See Mahler and Pessar, 2006, p 34.
11. Tariq Modood, Sharon Beishon and Satnam Virdee, *Changing Ethnic Identities*, London: PSI, 1994, p 13.
12. For education see for example Fauzia Ahmad, 'Modern Traditions? British Muslim Women and Academic Achievement', *Gender and Education*, vol 13, no 2, 2001, pp 137 – 152, for employment see Sally Evans and Sophia Bowlby, 'Crossing boundaries: racialised gendering and the labour market experiences of Pakistani migrant women in Britain', *Women's International Forum*, vol 23, no 4, 2000, pp 461-74. For identities see Claire Dwyer, 'Negotiating Diasporic Identities: young British South Asian Muslim Women', *Women's Studies International Forum*, vol 23, no 4, 2000, p 481. See also Reza Rahbari, 'Unveiling Muslim women: A trajectory of post-colonial culture', *Dialectical Anthropology*, vol 25, no 3/4, 2000, pp 321-32.
13. David Sibley, *Geographies of Exclusion*, London: Routledge, 1995.
14. Joanna Herbert, *Negotiating Boundaries in the City: Migration, Ethnicity and Gender in Britain*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008. See Mahler and Pessar, 2006, p 34.
15. See for example, Joanna Bornat *et al.*, 'Oral history and black history conference report', *Oral History*, vol 8, 1980, pp 21-3.
16. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, London: Vintage, 1994.
17. Nirmul Puwar, 'Melodramatic postures and constructions', in Nirmul Puwar and Parvati Raghuram, (eds), *South Asian Women in the Diaspora*, Oxford: Berg, 2003, Fauzia Ahmad, 'Still "in progress?" – methodological dilemmas, tensions and contradictions in theorising South Asian Muslim women', in Puwar and Raghuram, 2003.
18. See for example, Susan Burton, 'Issues in cross-cultural interviewing: Japanese women in England', *Oral History*, vol 31, no 1, 2003. See also Joanna Herbert, 'Negotiating

boundaries and the cross-cultural interview', in Richard Rodger and Joanna Herbert, (eds) *Testimonies of the City: Identity, Community and Change in a Contemporary Urban World*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007.

19. Herbert, 2007.
20. For further discussion of this diversity see Humayun Ansari, *The Infidel Within Muslims in Britain Since 1800*, London: Hurst and Company, 2004.
21. Office for National Statistics, *Census 2001 Key Statistics for Local Authorities in England and Wales*, London: TSO, 2003, p 89.
22. Deborah Phillips, 'The social and spatial segregation of Asians in Leicester', in Peter Jackson and Susan Smith, (eds), *Social Interaction and Ethnic Segregation*, London: Academic Press, 1981, p 108.
23. See National Statistics, <<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001/profiles/rank/ewhindu.asp>>
24. National Statistics, <<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001/profiles/rank/ewmuslim.asp>> Richard Bonney, 'Understanding and celebrating religious diversity: The growth of diversity in Leicester's places of religious worship since 1970', *Studies in the History of Religious and Cultural Diversity*, Academic Papers, Leicester: Centre for the History of Religious and Political Pluralism, 2003, p 27.
25. Gujaratis have been noted for their economic success in Britain and their upward mobility. For explanations for this see Roger Ballard, 'The South Asian presence in Britain and its transnational connections', in Bhikhu Parekh, Gurharpal Singh and Steven Vertovec (eds) *Culture and Economy in the Indian Diaspora*, London: Routledge, 2004, pp 197-222. However Vertovec claims this equation with Gujaratis and wealth is a stereotype and the main factor influencing prosperity is the distinction between those who originated from East Africa and those from the Indian subcontinent. See Steven Vertovec, 'Multicultural, multi-Asian, multi-muslim Leicester: dimensions of social complexity, ethnic organisation and local government interface', *Innovation*, vol 7, no 3, 1994, p 265.
26. Estimates of the numbers involved vary between 2,000 and 10,000, Improvement and

Development Agency, *Taking Forward Community Cohesion in Leicester*, Leicester: Leicester City Council, 2002, p 58. Leicester received Kosovan refugees as part of the evacuation programme in 1999 and Leicester's multicultural character has been seen as the attraction for Somalis who have migrated to Leicester from other British cities and the Netherlands, Sweden and Norway.

27. Henrietta O'Connor, *The Spatial Distribution of Ethnic Minority Communities in Leicester, 1971, 1981, 1991. Analysis and Interpretation*, Leicester: Centre for Urban History and The Ethnicity Research Centre, University of Leicester, 1995.

28. Ahmed Andrews, 'A history of South Asian migration into Leicester: an essay on Hindu / Muslim segregation', in Nick Jewson, (ed), *Migration Processes and Ethnic Divisions*, Leicester: The Centre for Urban History and The Ethnicity Research Centre, University of Leicester, 1995, pp 66-88. Rosemary Hill, 'The Housing Characteristics and Aspirations of Leicester's Inner City Asian Community', unpublished University of Leicester PhD thesis, 1987.

29. Gerard Seenan, 'Making do without the mainstream', *The Guardian*, 20 June 2002.

30. The men's stories are discussed in Herbert, 2008, particularly chapter six and Joanna Herbert, 'Masculinity and migration: Life stories of East African Asian men', in Louise Ryan and Wendy Webster, (eds), *Gendering Migration: Masculinity, Femininity and Ethnicity in Post-War Britain*, Aldershot: Ashgate, forthcoming.

31. Interview with Munisa, 3 April 2004.

32. Interview with Munisa, 3 April 2004.

33. Roger Ballard, 'The emergence of desh pardesh' in Roger Ballard (ed), *Desh Pardesh: South Asian Experience in Britain*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1994.

34. Raj, 2003.

35. Interview with Hasina, 18 March 2004.

36. Interview with Hasina, 18 March 2004.

37. Interview with Munisa, 3 April 2004.

38. Brian Roberts, *Biographical Research*, Buckingham: Open University Press, 2001, p 128.

39. Interview with Sameeha, 10 March 2004.

40. Interview with Sameeha, 10 March 2004.

41. Interview with Nasiha, 16 March 2004.

42. Interview with Nasiha, 16 March 2004.

43. The feeling of being 'out of place' is a major theme of Nirmal Puwar, *Space Invaders, Race, Gender and Bodies out of Place*, Oxford: Berg 2004.

44. Interview with Nasiha, 16 March 2004.

45. Interview with Naeema, 18 March 2004.

46. For a review see Rachel Pain, 'Gender, race age and fear in the city', *Urban Studies*, vol 38, no 5-6, 2001, pp 899-913. See also Kusminder Chalal and Louis Julienne, 'We Can't All Be White': *Racist Victimisation in the UK*, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1999.

47. Sibley, 1995.

48. Phil Kinsman, 'Landscape, race and national identity: the photography of Ingrid Pollard', *Area* vol 27, no 4, 1995, pp 300-10.

49. Interview with Nasiha, 16 March 2004.

50. See Franzosi, 1998, p 527, Roberts, 2001, p 124 and Joan Sangster, 'Telling our stories: Feminist debates and the use of oral history' in Robert Perks, and Alistair Thomson, (eds), *The Oral History Reader*. London: Routledge, 1998, pp 94-95 for the potential problems associated with narrative analysis. See also, Leen Beyers, 'Unfolding urban memories and ethnic identities: Narratives of ethnic diversity in Limberg, Belgium', in Rodger and Herbert, 2007 and Valentina Gulini Zrnić, 'Meanings of the city: Zagreb's new housing communities since the 1950s', in Roger and Herbert, 2007.

51. Katy Gardner, *Age Narrative and Migration: The Life Course and Life Histories of Bengali Elders in London*, Oxford: Berg, 2002.

52. Chamberlain and Thompson, 1998.

53. For further discussion see Herbert, 2007.

54. See Pnina Werbner, *Imagined Diasporas Among Manchester Muslims*, London: Hurst Publishers 2002, Liz Fekete, 'Anti-Muslim racism and the European security state, *Race and Class*, vol. 46, no 1, 2004, pp 3-29.

55. Cynthia Brown, 'Moving on: reflections on oral history and migrant communities in Britain', *Oral History*, vol 34, no 1, 2006, pp 69-80.

56. Ahmad, 2003; Deborah Phillips, 'Ethnic and racial segregation: A critical perspective', *Geography Compass*, vol 2, 2007 [online article].

57. Ahmad, 2003, p 45.

Address for correspondence:
j.herbert@qmul.ac.uk