Sufi Islam and Anti-Colonial Politics

Ameena Al Rasheed[i]

SHORT BIO

[i]Dr. Ameena Al Rasheed, author of "Alternative Performativity of Muslimness," is a former UN senior manager for gender affairs and EU consultant on mediation, peace, political dialogue, and gender.

INSTITUTIONAL AFFILIATION
International Consultant at: United Nations and The European Union
ameena34@hotmail.com

ORCID
https://orcid.org/0000 0002 0174- 9668

ABSTRACT

This article will tackle how African Muslim Women represented by Sudanese women, are undergoing specific transformations of identity, religion and gender roles in the diaspora space. Identities are said to be in constant processes of negotiation between the traditions of the homeland and that of the host society, thus to investigate the relationship between ideologies of new spaces and Sudanese women's identity, as Muslims and African immigrants affected by the host society's race and gender roles and discourses, this article will provide an analysis of the multi-faceted nature of Islam represented by the popular, Sufi Islam attached to the tradition of the home land, and the dominant Islamic religious discourse in West Yorkshire. The article will examine issues of rights, representations and history, and shed light on these African Muslim women's ideas, perspectives and struggles in the diasporic space, and also unpack the interplay of Africanism, Arabism Muslimness/Sufism in the lives of Sudanese women, as related to wider African Islamic Sufi culture as an integral part of the composition of identity.

The article seeks to discuss, debate, provoke and rethink Blackness, Muslimness and religious performativities in a nuanced way that capture the complexities regarding African Muslim communities, diasporic experiences, and the multifaceted nature of Islam. Highlighting Africa Muslim experiences that have long been devalued, side lined and excluded, this article interrogates and adds to the field of ethnicity and race as it negotiates African Muslim identities in diverse ways. The article will represent work done on Black Muslim subjects in diverse and unique contexts, challenging the discourses that have produced homogenous identities and homogenous performativities of Islam. It is a call to decolonize the discourses dominant in the West in general and in the UK in particular, and to resist hegemonic Muslim experience formed by mainstream Islam in West Yorkshire, UK.

KEYWORDS
Identity, Ethnicity, Performativity, Sufism, Africanism.

Introduction

Sudanese women are undergoing specific transformations of identity, religion, and gender roles in the diaspora space. Through the lens of migration studies comes the understanding that identities are in constant processes of negotiation between the traditions of the homeland and that of the host society. This article investigates the relationship between ideologies of new (diaspora) spaces and Sudanese women's identity as Muslims and African immigrants affected by the host society's race and gender roles and discourses. By providing an analysis of the multi-faceted nature of Islam,

represented by the popular Sufi Islam, attached to the traditions of the homeland and the dominant Islamic religious discourse in West Yorkshire, United Kingdom (UK), this article examines issues of rights, representation, and history, shedding light on Sudanese African Muslim women's ideas, perspectives, and struggles in the diasporic space. In doing so, this article unpacks the interplay of Africanism, Arabism, Sufism, and Muslimness in the lives of Sudanese women as related to the wider African Islamic, Sufi culture that is an integral composition of their identity.

When compared to lineages of Islam from other continents, Islamic traditions practiced among different African communities reflect the multifaceted nature of Islam. On the one hand, Britain's mainstream Islam originated from the sub-Indian continent and represents the Muslims who arrived earlier in colonial history. These Muslims would go on to dominate the discourse of Islam in the UK. On the other, Islam from the African continent is traditional in itself,[1] achieved through the coming together of Islam and a huge variety of African beliefs and religions, alongside the presence of colonial Christianity and Judaism. This influenced the ways in which Islam was, and continues to be, understood, interpreted, and performed in Africa.[2] The African Islam of Sudan is a popular Islam, informed by a vibrant and unapologetic matrilineal community's understanding of Islam in which Sufism is the orthodoxy of Sudan's Islam.[3]

Between January 2010 and December 2011, sixty Sudanese women took part in the ethnographic research study I conducted in West Yorkshire, UK. The study comprised of a series of semi-structured interview in which all 60 women took part. The women individually consented to interviews that followed the usual ethical protocols and were approved by the University of Leeds. Throughout this article, the women are identified by the initials they randomly selected to maintain their anonymity. Forty-five percent (27) of the

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[1] Ali A. Mazrui, "African Islam and Islam in Africa: Between Exceptionalism and Marginality." *American Journal of Islam and Society 26, no.*3 (2009): i–xi. https://doi.org/10.35632/ajis.v26i3.1380

[2] Ameena Al-Rasheed, *Alternative performativities of Muslimness, the Intersection of Gender Race and Migration*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

[3] Ahmed Al-Shahi, "Sufism in Modern Islam," in *Islam in the Modern World RLE Politics of Islam*, eds. Denis MacEoin, and Ahmed Al-Shahi, (London: Routledge Press, 1983), 57–72.

women completed secondary school, twenty-six percent (16) were high school graduates, and twenty-eight percent (17) have university degrees. Most of the women had immigrated to the UK to reunite with their families, primarily with their husbands or brothers.[4]

"Radical" to indicate non-conformist/ Popular Islam: The ethnography

In addressing the multifaceted nature of Islam and the complex intersections of raced and gendered religious identities of Sudanese women in the diaspora space, an exploration of Islam[5] and Muslimness[6] as perceived, performed, and understood within the specific contexts of the African, Arab, and Islamic traditions is presented here. The article tackles the processes of migration, encounters with conflicting identities, and the essence of belonging and attachment experienced variously by Muslims in the UK to

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[4]   Al-Rasheed, *Alternative performativities of Muslimness*.

[5]   The word "Islam" means "submission" in Arabic. In terms of the religion it means "submission to the will of God". Islam is the second largest religion in the world, accounting for just over 25% of the world's population, and 50% of Africa's population are adherents to Islam. Islam is a part of the triad of Abrahamic monotheistic religion, which also includes Christianity and Judaism, and is centered on the writings of the Quran and prophet Mohamed's teachings. See Ahmed, Shahab. *What Is Islam?: The Importance of Being Islamic,* (Princeton /Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016.); Mozaffari, Mehdi, "What is Islamism? History and Definition of a Concept." *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions 8*, no.1, (2007): 17–33. https://doi.org/10.1080/14690760601121622.; and Karamustafa, Ahmet, "Islam: A civilizational Project and in Progress," in *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism, e*d. Omid Safi (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003), 98 - 110.

[6]   CRASSH, *Seeing   Muslimness: An   interdisciplinary   conference,* https://www.crassh.cam.ac.uk/events/41566/
       "Muslimness [is] an embodied lived experience [and] a guiding inquiry that extend into various realms from arts to politics to landscape; Muslimness is a dynamic and malleable mode of existence. The multifaceted manifestation of Muslimness and varieties of perspectives render it as having multiple conflicting meaning." See Al-Rasheed, Ameena. "The Politics of Race, Identity and Difference in the UK: Qualifying the Black Muslim African Woman." In *Critical Race and Gender,* edited by Shirley Anne Tate and Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez. London: Palgrave Macmillan, (2022) 69 - 86. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-83947-5_4.; and Bonino, Stefano, "Visible Muslimness in Scotland: between discrimination and integration," *Patterns of Prejudice, 49,* no.4 (2015): 367–391. https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2015.1066978.

examine the creation of diasporic religious spaces and how they relate to the experiences of African Muslim women from Sudan.[7]

Muslim women have received much attention and interest in the exploration of the interaction between gender, place, and religions. Indeed, the growing body of research on Muslim women also focuses on issues of domesticity, family relations and changing patterns of employment. However, little attention has been paid to the components that make up Muslim identity and culture as specifically produced through religious performativity. The intersectionality of gender, ethnicity, race, and identity of Sudanese Muslim women is the focus of this study, which explores the juxtaposition and polarizing depiction of dominant, mainstream Islam and Sudanese women's Sufi Islam in West Yorkshire and their attendant contestations.

Sufi Islam and anti-colonial politics: Black feminist epistemology

The theoretical framework of this article is guided by a Black feminist epistemology in an effort to be attentive to the multiple identities (African, Arab, and Muslim) of Sudanese women evident in the information and data gathered.[8] Black feminist thinkers, such as Johnson and Fábos, point to honoring the experiences of Sudanese women as sites of knowledge and cultural value. This article is an attempt to explicate the analytical notion of Muslim performativities, capturing the multifaceted nature of Islam and the complexity of intersecting raced, religious, and gendered identities of Sudanese women in the diasporic space.

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[7]   Sudanese women, as African, Arabic, and Muslim, do not fit neatly into the constructed category of Black and Minority Ethnic Groups, or BME that are constructed in the UK, problematizing all hegemonic assumptions specific to the intersection of race, gender, and religion.

[8]   See Black feminist Sudanese thinkers such as, Azeezat Johnson, "Getting Comfortable to Feel at Home: Clothing Practices of Black Muslim Women in Britain." *Gender, Place & Culture 24*, no.2 (2017): 274–87. doi:10.1080/0966369X.2017.1298571; Anita Fábos, "Resisting Blackness, Embracing Rightness: How Muslim Arab Sudanese Women Negotiate Their Identity in the Diaspora." *Ethnic and Racial Studies 35*, no.2 (2011): 218–237. doi:10.1080/01419870.2011.592594.

Islam and Muslimness have been perceived, performed, and understood within the specific context of the African, Arab, and Islamic traditions. The Sufi Islam of Sudan is a representation of the multi-faceted nature of Islam, informing the ways in which Sudanese women in West Yorkshire engage with Islam as manifested in the diasporic space. In West Yorkshire, there are two distinct Islamic and Muslim forms of performativity, traditions, and interpretations: one originating in Africa's Sufi traditions and matrilineal setting, and the other that emerged from the context of the Asian classical belt and sub-Indian continent.

This latter has strict patriarchal conventions and restrictive performativities of Muslimness that are embedded in Asian traditions and cultural manifestations. Such conventions are evident in the highly regulated roles, duties, and performances assigned to women. The many social limitations imposed on women include dress code, movement, and limited use of public spaces. In contrast, African Sufi-Islam originated from matrilineal succession and African traditional beliefs, paving the way for more space given to women who, in Sudan, have successfully bargained with the systems to challenge limitations. In the diaspora space of West Yorkshire, the interaction between the hegemonic, mainstream Islam from the sub-Indian continent's traditions and Africa's Sufism raises issues of race, ethnicity and gender, igniting contentions around Sudanese women's identity and religious/ritual practices.

On Being Muslim in West Yorkshire

It must be stated from the outset that different socio-political histories across the Islamic world result in different Muslim performativities for different groups. Consequently, the processes of migration, conflicting identities, the essence of belonging and attachment have all been experienced differently by Muslims in the UK. Examining the creation of religious spaces in the diaspora and how they relate to Muslims' current places of residence, as well as to ties and connections to countries of origin and their religious politics, assist in explicating the complexities of Muslim women's experiences.

One feature of Muslim early migrants from Pakistan, Kashmir, and Bangladesh is that these religious groups were mainly conservative Muslims, and Sunni followers of Sufi orders. They came from rural and conservative areas, and arrived to the UK, carrying with them religious

conservativism, and became active in building institutions with religious nature, such as the UK Islamic Mission, the British Muslim Forum, the Union of Muslim Organizations, the Islamic Society of Britain and its youth arm, Young Muslims. They also developed representative bodies, such as the Bradford Council of Mosques, the Lancashire Council of Mosques and the Blackburn Council of Mosques. The nature of these institutions, built by Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Kashmiri migrants, illustrates the conservative nature of Islam from the Indian sub-continent. In comparison, there are no Sudanese mosques in the UK. Rather, the Sudanese community typically hold their cultural events in churches across the cities and neighborhood, including celebrations for the Holy month of Ramadan, in contrast to the Muslims from the Sub-Indian continent. Women normally pray at mosques. Indeed, the Middle Eastern mosques are the only mosques that admits female worshipers and are used by Sudanese women.

Sudanese Women in West Yorkshire

The alienation of Sudanese women in West Yorkshire tends to not only be due to their ethnic identity as Africans but also because of the religious identities they represent that diverge from the dominant mainstream Islam in West Yorkshire as advocated by the broader community of Muslims from Asia and the Indian sub-continent. As HW astutely states,

> We are Sudanese, a mixture of Arabism and Africanism, and we cannot give up one identity. I am African Arab, we are not 100% African nor are we 100% Arabs, so we have this multiple identity and it is difficult to give up one for the other, but we are clearly Africans who speaks Arabic and relate to the Arabs in terms of culture and religion.[9]

These Sudanese women refuse definitions of themselves that were not made or informed by them. Instead, the women have found ways to reject, accept, and/or creatively reinterpret "colonial epistemologies" to fashion definitions that include them and, thereby, support and nurture their present and future selves in the diasporic space of West Yorkshire. Importantly, the women embrace the multiplicity and intersectionality of their identity as they

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[9]   HW, Interview *Series 2010 - 2011* Interviewed by Ameena Alrasheed, 2010 - 2011, University of Leeds, West Yorkshire, UK.

adopt the new identity of "immigrant" and navigate and negotiate their diasporic home.

The link between the religious fundamentalism and performances of mainstream Asian Islam can be illustrated by the Asian community's activities. Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Kashmiri intra-community relations are largely driven by the religious denominations, particularly amongst the first generation, and is equally driven by conservative fundamental religious understanding that is manifested in attitudes towards other ethnic groups. Another feature that illustrates the nature of the religious affiliation of the migrants from Pakistan, and other Asian Muslims, is the membership profile of mosques in the UK. Mosques are predominantly associated with Pakistanis, Indian Muslims, and Bangladeshis. According to the community report on Pakistani Muslims in the UK (London, 2009), most Pakistanis are Sunni Muslims[10] and the four most important movements in the UK are the Deobandis and Tablighi Jamaat, Barelvis or Sunni Sufis, the Jamaat-e Islami, and the Ahl-e-Hadith. These movements are similar in their formation to the Sudanese Sufi-groups. However, the cultural settings, as well as the history and culture under which each of these groups emerged, has influenced its performance and ideology. Sufi-Islam in the Indian Sub-continent has been influenced by the Islamic scholar Al Maududi, leader of Jamaat al Islami, a strict religious party. In contrast, the Sufi-Islam in Africa has been greatly influenced by the African indigenous religions and by the history of the old Christian kingdoms in many parts of Africa, particularly Sudan. Thus, we can differentiate between the two discourses of Islam: one, the strict fundamental Islam of the Indian sub-continent, and the other, the popular and lenient Islam of Africa.

Between the 1960s and the 1980s, the sectarian segmentation of mosques in the UK was most noticeable. Fierce rivalry for mosque control mostly played out between these groups of Muslims, whereby these mosques were generally off limits for African Muslims.

This structure and nature of identity performance in the UK stands as a point of divergence when we look at Sudanese African Muslims. The

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[10]   IPSOS Social Research Institute - A Review of Survey Research on Muslims in the UK (https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/publication/documents/2018-03/a-review-of-survey-research-on-muslims-in-great-britain-ipsos_0.pdf)

performativity of Muslimness among Sudanese Muslim women in the UK portrays a diverse Islam that is associated with the historically specific culture, indigenous beliefs, and performances of Sudan.

Thus, this article attempts to establish the Muslim community in a historically specific context, rather than homogenous and static form, with specific attention to discourses of othering and exclusion. Moreover, it seeks to illustrate the multifaceted ways of performing Islam and Muslimness that need to be brought to light and examined. Centering knowledge about subjects that are marginalized and under-researched, this contribution will demonstrate that Blackness and Muslimness as contested identities that are often produced and reproduced in relation to the dominant, and hegemonic, power dynamics of mainstream Islam in West Yorkshire. The strategies and coping mechanisms adopted by Sudanese women to resist rigid and exclusionary discourses in West Yorkshire demonstrate the conflicting and multidimensional meaning and construction of blackness and Africanness within Islam.

An account of Sudanese women's movement, and their emergence and development, is vital and can explain the divergence of African Muslim performances versus Sub-Indian continent Islam as they function in the diasporic space.

The Arabic Islamic discourse in African Sudan.

The development and conceptualization of the Sudanese national identity followed the development of Sudanese Arabic Literature in 1930 and arose through the religious philosophy of the Tiganiyya and other Sufi sects. This played a considerable role in shaping class and ethnic relations in different parts of the country.[11] These sects were able to constitute themselves as local institutions that cut across the country's ethnic, class, and geographical identities.

The various ways of representing, and not representing, Muslim women sheds light on the troubled construction of the category in the diasporic spaces of the UK and West Yorkshire. As Kandiyoti stresses, "Islam cannot

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[11]   Endre Stiansen and Michael Kevane, *Kordofan Invaded, Peripheral Incorporation and Social Transformation in Islamic Africa.* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 242.

be viewed in isolation from other societal factors such as political systems, kinship systems, economy, and religious identity cannot be disconnected from other social positions such as class, regional identification, ethnicity, education and age". [12] The construction of a homogeneous category of the "Muslim woman" shows the complex ways in which gender relates to religious identity, race and ethnicity. Indeed, Bernal stresses that,

> [t]he transformation in the Muslim world is gendered; any analysis must encompass both the ways in which gender is represented ideologically and the ways in which material conditions shape women's and men's lives. The general themes of seclusion of women and their restriction to the home and the village are not simply symbolic statements, but serve key functions in the emerging economic system, benefiting men and those who dominate the regional economy. [13]

Therefore, in line with Bernal and Kandoyoti, gender relations and the role of Islam can only be understood within the wider context of economic and social transformation. On the one hand, Muslim women have often been implicitly characterized as victims of their own culture and religion and the transformations in their lives are often overlooked or misunderstood when seen solely in terms of Islam. Such perspective undermines women's sound resistance. Cases of women significant contribution in uprisings against strict religious rules in Sudan and in Iran are just a few examples. On the other hand, the focus on Islam has largely ignored the role of the world system and capitalist expansion in shaping those gender relations. More emphasis has been laid on the unchanging religious texts and traditions, belying the importance of globalization as a process through which gender and religion are culturally constructed. Scholars[14] argue that women have

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[12]   Deniz Kandiyoti, *Women Islam and The State*. (London: Macmillan Press Limited 1991*)*:1.

[13]   Victoria Bernal, *"*Gender Culture and Capitalism and Women and the Remaking of Islamic Tradition in Sudanese Village," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 36, no.1 (1994).

[14]   See for example, Deniz Kandiyoti, "Women, Islam and the State." *Middle East Report, no. 173* (1991): 9–14. https://doi.org/10.2307/3012623; Alaine Hutson, "Women Men and Patriarchal Bargaining, In an Islamic Sufi Order, The Tiganiyya in Kano, Nigeria 1937 to the Present," *Gender and Society 15, No.*5 (2001) 734 –753; Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im,

special roles within Sufism, but the old and formal religions and beliefs and practices do not exist side by side anymore in most Muslim states.

Social change in Islamic society is multi-directional and transformational, as in the case of Iran, where prior to 2023 the Islamic dress (*Hijab*) facilitated women's entry into new public spheres, the Hijab has thus paved the way for Iranian women to enter the public sphere, while, historically, it has been perceived as a symbol of oppression when imposed on women, as in the case of Sudan. In 2023, following decades of the Khomaini rule in the Iran, women challenged the government orders and marched on the streets, categorical rejecting the compulsory hijab. The Iranian morality police targeted women who were not wearing the hijab. This series of protests and civil unrest began in Tehran, ignited in September 2022, when 22 years old Mahsa Amini was arrested for not wearing hijab, and died two days later in prison. As rightly suggested by Bernal "the intensification of social restrictions on women and the emergence of new secular and religious notions of gender difference are direct results of the communities"[15] growing integrations into the world economy. Capitalism coexists and cooperates with religious Islamic fundamentalism. Islamic fundamentalism is a political ideology aiming to return to the founding scriptures of Islam and includes strict codes of behavior. It is defined as a Islamic revivalist movement which profess strict adherence to the Quran and Islamic principles, in general, even though conservative ideologies and practices tend to marginalize women. The local patterns of gender roles and the ideologies supporting these roles do not constitute an autonomous cultural system reproduced by the communities. Rather, the realities and ideals governing gender roles and relations are responsive to the changing economic, political, and ideological conditions in the world system.

Sudanese women who have lived experience of being the Other due their ethnicity, gender, and religion render the Black identity as complex and affiliated with the complexities of experience that creates potential conflict due to the gendered class and ethnic positioning. Sudanese women as

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Islam and Human Rights: Selected Essays of Abdullahi An-Na'im (1st ed.), ed. Mashood A. Baderin, (London: Routledge, 2006), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315251790.

[15] Victoria Bernal, "Gender Culture and Capitalism and Women and the Remaking of Islamic Tradition in Sudanese Village," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 36, no.1 (1994):174.

Africans may not fit into the constructed category of BME in the UK. Moreover, they are equally unable to qualify as Muslims within the boundaries of the hegemonic mainstream Islam in the UK. The concept of race and class differentiate these experiences and, consequently, has changed the nature of the systematic oppression that Black women endure in the diasporic space.

Within the UK context, the deconstruction of the Black and minority ethnic groups as "BME", not only revealed the ambiguity of what it means to be Black and/or a woman, but also rendered the category of Black essentialized. Black and minority ethnic groups is a structure that facilitates the categorization of all non-Westerns as belonging to one identified structure of BME.

Indeed, Muslim/Black and Christian/White differences are central to the exclusionary projects. Muslim/African/Blacks, in contrast, experience yet another discourse of exclusion that is more racialized through color and ethnicity. The Othering discourses undermine and marginalize the African subject, adding to it another site of marginalization of being Muslim. The racialization discourse is, hence, built on race, ethnicity and religious factors.[16]

However, we must not overlook the resistance strategies adopted by these women in challenging unfavorable terms and conditions. African Muslim Sudanese women challenge the definitions of Islam, as well as the definition of Black identity within the UK context, and present an alternative discourse for defining Islamic, Muslim, and Black identities.

Sudanese women from Queens Mothers to Hareem

The rhetoric of UK Blackness carries political and class connotations, as does Islamic rhetoric. When applied to women, this rhetoric shifts towards notions of gender, specifically women's rights, for example, women's subjugation as manifested in the veil narratives. The deployment of Blackness as a metaphor for women's enslavement, as articulated by Simone de Beauvoir, "the colonial woman is pulled in one direction by her

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[16] Ameena Al-Rasheed, *Alternative Performativities of Muslimness, the Intersection of Gender, Race and Migration* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

sex, another by her colour",[17] suggests that Sudanese women similarly endure two rhetorical modes as they are Black and Muslims at the same time.

The argument that Islam is inherently patriarchal, favoring the interests of men above those of women, is put forth by Fatima Mernissi[18] and Alya Baffoun.[19] However, this does not mean that it is impossible to challenge patriarchy within the religion as an institution. Genuine efforts to challenge structurally enforced gender inequality exist, including efforts made by women in the Middle East and in Muslim African countries to advance women's agenda and to advocate women's empowerment and contribution in the public space. It is important to face the reality of religion and religious institutions to challenge its patriarchal nature. Women in Libya, Sudan, Uganda, Algeria, and other African countries were able to fulfil their demands of equal pay for equal work in the early sixties. Moreover, the struggle for independence in African nations against the colonial rules have shown women's participation in liberation movements, publicly engaging in the struggle and resistance.

Within the context of Islam in Sudan, the class structure and power is manifested through various aspects: the process of importing the standard and mainstream image of Islam from the Arabic Peninsula; decades of Sudanese migration to the Gulf and Arabic states; formulating an elitist view; and challenging the relative autonomy in the practice of Islam in Sudan, the so-called popular Islam of Sudan, as performed by women. As a result, a process of enforcing Islam as perceived by the northern Islamic Arabic elites was instigated after the Islamists took over in Sudan.

In her study of women in Darfur, Karen Willmse has reflected on how the women of Darfur were perceived by Muslim fundamentalists:

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[17] Robin E. Visel, "Othering the Self: Nadine Gordimer's Colonial Heroines," *Ariel* 19, no.4 (1988):*33*

[18] Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society*. (Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1975).

[19] Alya Baffoun, "Women and Social Change in the Muslim Arab World," *Women's Studies Int. Forum 5,* no.2, (1982): 227-242.

Darfur women seem to act badly; they have incorrect attitudes to their proper attire and are disobedient to their husbands. Although their intentions may be good, the fallacies might be the result of the women's lack of religious knowledge, something appropriate education can redress.[20]

Such perception about women in Darfur aims to attribute their attires, performances. and way of life to the lack of appropriate understanding of Islam as perceived by Muslim fundamentalists, opening the gate for fundamental and strict Islamic traditions to be introduced or imposed on the women.

Paying homage to the history of Africa and African Kingdoms will illustrate the level of demarcation between African Islam and Middle Eastern Islam. Niara Sudarkasa stresses that,

> women in Africa in general and in sub- Saharan Africa in particular were conspicuous in high places in the pre-colonial era, and were queen mothers, queen sisters, princesses and female chiefs and holders of offices in most towns and villages.[21]

The history of Sudan is dominated by chronicles of the Queen Mothers, such as Queen Candace, Amina, Amani Rinas, and Sitana. However, African women's agency has generally been overlooked in Western literature, which is overwhelmingly focused on women's oppression under Islamic law. Sudan is caught between two African historical specificities. As an African state, it shares the history of Queen Mothers, where Candace is the most cited Queen in Sudan's history, and the history of the Islamic state of Mahdism, where women were sent back to the domestic domain. The interplay of both Africanism and Islamism has shaped the current image of Sudanese women, with a shared history between African women and Islamic culture. Thus, Sudanese Muslim women's identities have incorporated conflicting and contested identities, whereby both African and Arabic cultures are an integral part in the composition of Sudanese women's identities.

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[20]   Willimse, *One Foot in Heaven,* 49.

[21]   Niara Sudarkasa, *The Status of Women in Indigenous African Societies; Essays and Speeches.* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1986):1.

Sufi Islam has a significant impact on Sudanese women's status in the society. A notable debate considers the extent to which Sufi Islam and Sufi leaders serve to empower women. Kandiyoti referred to this as "bargaining with patriarchy", while I perceive it as African women's capacity to penetrate the patriarchal structure and influence the patriarchal agenda from within the religious structure and Sufi orders.[22] Thus, within Sufi-Islam, Sufi women leaders exist and retain no leass power than that which is maintained by men.

Sufi-Islam, patriarchy and the African woman

From my ethnographic research and the semi-structured interviews, most of the Muslim Sudanese women have identified themselves as Arab and African, claiming both Islamic identity and Arabism. These are but a reflection of a construction that has affected the country at large, whereby their identity is dependent upon the very social context and political ideology under which such an identity was formulated and constructed. For example, Sudanese women's movement emerged from the growth of the nationalist movement in Sudan in the 1940s when considerable political and economic rights were achieved for Sudanese women. However, Sudanese women did not secure the right to vote and stand for election until 1964, when a quota system guaranteeing seats for women and participation in federal and state legislatures was put in place. Article 32 act 2008 of the Sudan constitution allocated 25% of seats at national and state parliamentary assembly to women. By 2010, women's participation had reached 28%.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, women set up coping mechanisms in their dealings with the patriarchal structures promoted by Middle Eastern religions. Sufism and Sufi Tariqas in Sudan and in Sub-Saharan Africa, like the Tiganiyya, accommodated women and provided space for them. Consequently, women have been able to challenge the patriarchal structure of the religious sects and society at large.[23] One coping mechanism used by Sudanese women has been to commit to variations within essentially patriarchal religions, allowing for more egalitarian gender relations and social structures. Egalitarian gender relations are dominant in Sudan. During the 1940s,

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[22]   Deniz Kandiyoti, *Women and Rural Development Policies* (Brighton. Sussex Institute of Development Studies, 1988): 7.

[23]   Kandiyoti, *Women Islam and The State*, 25.

women established their association and took part in the liberation movement and earned equal pay for equal work for women in the 60s, entering the public space and successfully occupying decision-making positions. However, this triggered an attack from the Islamic fundamentalist regime that advocated for women's "traditional" role as housewives and bearers for children, which eventually led to more strict Islamic rules being imposed on women, including requiring the Hijab to be worn and restricting women's movement and access to many professions and studies, including architecture, engineering, and more.

It is understood that women, in general, have gained advantages within Sufism and managed to bargain for a place in the Sufi traditions, pulling from the teachings of Sufi Islam and the ancient presence of Rabia al-Adawiyah, a leading women figure in Sufi Islam. Badran[24] and Schimmel[25] examined women in the tradition of mysticism, followed by Dwyer,[26] who explored the influence of the popular Sufi tradition. Moreover, Beck,[27] Keddie,[28] and Mernissi[29] have all cited Sufism's contribution in enhancing women's development.

This is one peculiar aspect of Islam in Sudan and has certainly influenced and shaped the perceptions and cultural practices of the Sudanese. Sufi Islam in Sudan is a moderate form of Islam, with a liberal nature that has impacted political, social, and cultural practices in Sudan's history prior to the Islamic regime. Indeed, Sufi Tariqas in Sudan accommodates women and supports their inclusion, in general. Islam in Sudan has widely been

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[24] Margot Badran, *"Competing Agenda Feminisms, Islam and the State in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Egypt,"* In *Women Islam and The State, Deniz Kandiyoti (ed), (*Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991).

[25] Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical dimension of Islam*, Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1991.

[26] Dwyer, Daisy, Women Sufism and Decision Making in Moroccan Islam, Harvard University Press. Harvard.

[27] Louis Beck, and Nikki Keddie, *Women in the Muslim World*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978).

[28] Nikki R. Keddie, *Women in Middle Eastern History; Shifting boundaries in Sex and Gender*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

[29] Fatima Mernissie, W*omen and Islam an Historical Theological Inquiry* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

known as a popular Islam, a blend of Sufi Islam and Indigenous African beliefs. Al-Shahi perceives Sufism as Sudan's orthodoxy, arguing that the main difference between Sufism and orthodox Islam concerns the positions of saints, the heads of Sufi orders, and Sheikhs.[30]

It has been suggested that the Sufi emphasis on personal and emotional faith has made the Islamic movement in Sudan more open, pragmatic, and moderate in its handling of religious and political issues, in comparison to other Muslim Brotherhood movements in the region.[31]

Members of the Sufi movement have benefited from modern education and an appreciation for, and a commitment to, economic and social development. The position of the two major Sufi orders in Sudanese politics reflects the moderate character of these sects. Their alliances with the Communist Party of Sudan and other political opponents of the ousted Islamist region are evidence of this political openness.[32]

Sufism, or Islamic mysticism, was something of an exception in Islam, providing relatively greater religious space for Muslim women. Women occupied high positions within the Sufi sects and groups. In early Islam, one female figure in the ranks of the mystics included Rabia al-Adawiyah, who lived in the ninth century and is considered to be one of the great formative influences in the development of the Sufi doctrine. In popular Sufism, both women and men have been recognized as "Awliyaa" ("friends" of God), performing miracles, and arbitrating and communicating through a closeness God. After death, the graves of the Awliyaa usually become shrines for visitation as places of prayer and fidelity.

According to Baldock,[33] Sufism has a powerful symbolic imagery in its writings and teaching on what is called Divine Unity (in Arabic *al-tawhid*). Symbols are used to define outer and inner realities. The vocabulary used in Sufi teaching is the thematic imagery of wine, the lover, and the beloved,

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[30] Denis MacEoin, and Ahmed Al-Shahi, *Islam in the Modern World (*London/Canberra: Croom Helm, 1983), 24.

[31] Mohamed Salih, *African Democratization and African Politics.* (London: Pluto Press, 2001), 34.

[32] *Ibid,* 35.

[33] John Baldock, *The Essence of Sufism* (London: Arcturus Publishing Limited, 2016)

all following the classic love stories. The symbolic language of the Sufi is widely illustrated in the poems of Omar Khayyam and Hafiz who lived in the eleventh century. Imagery of wine and drinking are metaphors for the spiritual ecstasy experienced in moments of profound union with the divine.

Sufism (in Arabic *tasawwuf*) is a spiritual or mystical aspect of Islam that developed alongside and in reaction to the formalistic tenets of scripturalist Islam. Sufi religious brotherhoods or paths (in Arabic *tariqa* or *turuq*), in particular the *Qadiriyya*, and the *Tiganiyya*, have been powerful in Eastern Africa, Nigeria and Sudan.

The advent of the Muslim Brotherhood in Sudan disrupted the Sufi mainstream and introduced orthodox Islamic practice into Sudanese society. Umar[34] stressed that the shift from Sufism to anti-Sufism entails a reorientation from a communal to an individualistic mode of religiosity and seems to be more in tune with the rugged individualism of capitalist social relations.[35] Although it was a disruption to Sudanese society, this anti-Sufism reorientation did not take root in Sudan, but did create a, small yet notable, disruption.

In interrogating the Sufi sects in Sudan, it is important to mention again that Sudan's politics were long dominated by Sufi political parties, the *Ansar* and the People's Democratic Party*, or *Khatmiyya.* Interestingly, Al Shahi[36] sees Sufism as Sudan's orthodoxy, and he emphasizes the many ways in which Sufism and politics are interrelated in Sudan. For example, one of the most famous religious and political movements in Sudan was the Republican movement, led by Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, which was characterized by a great reformist attitude towards Islam with a Sufism background.[37]

Sudanese Islam is often called "the popular Islam", characterized by its tolerance and disregard for Sharia, except in the areas of personal status law and inheritance, and alignment with Sudanese political culture, which is

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[34] Muhammad. S. Umar, "Changing Islamic Identity in Nigeria from the 1960s to the1980s From Sufism to Anti-Sufism," in *Muslim Identity and Social Change in Sub-Saharan Africa, ed.* Louis Brenner, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 154 - 178.

[35] *Ibid,* 178.

[36] Ahmed Al-Shahi, "Sufism in Modern Sudan,*" Adebiyat* no. 10 (1999): 63–82.

[37] *Ibid*.

generally inclined towards the popular Islam. Sudanese Islam's accommodation of the country's religious, cultural, and ethnic diversity created a context of powerful resistance to Islamization in its revivalist and fundamentalist versions.

Sudanese Muslim women in West Yorkshire: Accommodations and negotiation

West Yorkshire is the space where the Sudanese Muslim women came to realize their African ethnicity and appreciate the multiple identities they share. In this space, issues of race were highlighted and made visible, suggesting that identities are always in a process of construction in the diaspora. Moreover, Sudanese women in West Yorkshire have constantly highlighted their encounters with racism from British/Asian communities. Sharing an aspect of identity, religion in this case, with Asians has not safeguarded them from experiencing racism. Rather, the interplay of ethnicity and class are evident in this specific space.

How the complex encounters of Sudanese women in the Diaspora space of West Yorkshire, has been manifested in their views about identity, Islam, and belonging is shown below:

> We are African; there is no question, so we'd better start to assert our Africanism and I prefer our identity as Sudanese. (AL)[38]

> We are Sudanese, a mixture of Arabism and Africanism, and we cannot give up one identity. I am African Arab, we are not 100% African nor are we 100% Arabs, so we have this multiple identity and it is difficult to give up one for the other, but we are clearly Africans who speaks Arabic and relate to the Arabs in terms of culture and religion. (HW)[39]

> We are Muslims, and African and Arabs as well, and becoming more ingrained in the British society, in terms of getting used to it. See, I

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[38] AL, *Interview series 2010 - 2011,* Interviewed by Ameena Alrasheed, University of Leeds, West Yorkshire, UK.

[39] AL, *Interview series 2010 - 2011,* Interviewed by Ameena Alrasheed, 2010 - 2011, University of Leeds, West Yorkshire, UK.

am a social worker and I interact mostly with British people from different backgrounds in my work, it is not a problem as far as we are accepted, but it is difficult somehow as you know (HA)[40]

The Asians are really fanatics, they do not understand Islam the same way we do, or perform Islam like we do, we are liberal compared to them or to the Saudis, but among us we have the same fanatic people, but I think the culture is different and the practice is different, they do not allow women to pray in the mosques, but that is very normal for us Sudanese, and tell me what is wrong with the church we can get together there as well for Ramadan and our social events why not? (NO)[41]

Sudanese women in the UK are connected to the politics of race and ethnicity that plays an important role in the way in which they came to position themselves in the country. Their race, ethnicity, and religious location, being African-Muslim-Arabic, brings ethnicity, religion, and race into discourses that are always troubled by the Other. The intersection of the various components of Sudanese women's identities is complex because it is difficult to isolate any one component.

UK socio-cultural life is involved in a politics of nation-making that categorizes and constructs the identities of the Other. Field notes:

The question of African diasporic or African descent immigrants becoming black is the only context in which Euro-immigrants becoming white. ... The real issue is not how immigrants became white or black, but how persons not born and bred to it, whatever their ancestry, became oriented in the Western world of Black and white. [42]

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40 HA, *Interview series 2010 - 2011,* Interviewed by Ameena Alrasheed, 2010 - 2011, University of Leeds, West Yorkshire, UK.

41 NO, *Interview series 2010–2011,* Interviewed by Ameena Alrasheed, 2010–2011, University of Leeds, West Yorkshire, UK.

42 J. B. Field, *Whiteness Racism and Identity. International Labour and Working Class History*, Issue 60, (2001): 48-56, p. 52.

There is no doubt that Sudanese African Muslims became oriented by the sudden encounter with the Western world of Black and White. It is worth mentioning here that the Sudanese women interviewed were mostly puzzled when they were faced with the question of ethnicity in official papers, and tended to tick the box labelled "Other", as it is not possible to claim the two ethnic identities of Arab and African. In Gilroy's words, "The raciological order of the diasporic space deprives Black ethnicities as well as Muslims, and creates norms of exclusions and marginalization".[43]

For Sudanese women, race and ethnic identity, as well as their migrant status as refugees or asylum seekers, seems to transform their perspectives on their own ethnic identity. Women tend to eventually embrace Africanism. Thus, Whiteness in the diasporic space provides endless variations to the theme of race, as mentioned. It transforms an old Arab identity into a new and well-received African identity among these women.

Gilroy notes that, « "Black" and "British" have been positioned as mutually exclusive in the UK, which is why it is difficult to establish the grounds for a new Black British identity, particularly out of refugeedom".[44] The impact of exile on women, in particular, is perceived as a construction of a space that provides women with a sense of independence and freedom.
Exile enhances the trend to build collective identities and to recall home. Women were able to conquer alienation and to build pacts by gathering and organizing events.

The helplessness of the refugee and immigrant categories and groups of people have led to the understanding of refugeedom as a crisis, or Calamity in Gatrell's words. [45] The narratives of the Sudanese women not only embody awareness of the trauma of dislocation, but also portray a great fear of the social consequences of communal disintegration, exclusion, and alienation.

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[43] Paul Gilroy, *After Empire, Melancholia or Convivial Culture*. London: Routledge, 2004.
[44] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic, Modernity and Double Consciousness*, London: Verso. 1993.
[45] Peter Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking: Refugees in Russia during World War I.* Indianapolis: Indiana University Press. 2005.

Sudanese women's ongoing journey of displacement plays a critical role in their identity transformation, as exile increases personal autonomy. These are Muslims women with Black identities and, as Sudanese women, they use their narratives to challenge and resist the dominant hegemonic discourses of West Yorkshire. It is because of their Black identity and Islamic religion that they face more challenges and encounters.

Sudanese women's identity illuminates the multi-faceted nature of Islam and challenges the production of a mainstream Islam in the UK, where Muslims are constantly portrayed as one homogenous group. Indeed, Sudanese women are often subjected to multiple forms of racism and exposed to the reality that racism is institutional in the country, whereby mosques are off limits for African. As such, it has become imperative to problematize such suppositions and to present accounts of diverse and alternative lived experiences of an African and Muslim subject.

Conclusion

Sudanese African Muslim women's identity has undergone specific transformation in the diasporic space of the UK. As African Muslim women, they are exposed to alternative performativities of Muslimness and to a more rigid structure of Islam. They negotiate their own space from within the traditions of both their homeland and that of the host society. For the Sudanese community, every religious place is a holy place, and Sudanese Muslims can comfortably settle with the idea and practice of holding prayers and religious feasts and occasions in churches across the UK, in contrast to other Muslim communities in the UK.

This article has discussed, debated, and contemplated ideas of Muslimness and the religious performativities of Sufi-Islam versus the mainstream Islam in the UK, capturing the diasporic experiences and encounters of African Sudanese Muslim women, their history, and their Sufi-Islam/popular Islam. Moreover, this article has levied a call to decolonize the dominant and hegemonic Islamic discourse of the mainstream Islam in the UK. One form of resisting the hegemonic Muslim experience formed by the mainstream Islam is to set examples of the multi-faceted nature of Islam and revisit the history, agency, and roots of the diverse Islamic doctrine, cultures, performances, and places.

Identities authorized in British policies exclude minority identities, particularly Black, and alienates Muslims and Islam. African identities are a threat to the nation, thus, the African Sudanese Muslim women's position is problematized in the UK. This has been reflected in the social policy and practices on immigration, asylum, and nationality that reflect high levels of anxiety and instability.

The experiences of immigrants explicate the significance of race and ethnicity as a basis for exclusion and inclusion, and its intersection with hybridity, identity, and race. Within this, religion has historically been, and continues to be, a volatile space. Sufism, gender, and Islam in Sudan and in West Yorkshire are no different.

An articulation of what being a womn in Africa in general and what they endure through their lives is well presented by Nnaemeka who stresses that, "African women are fighting against two colonialisms, one in the form of internally induced patriarchal structures, and the other in the form of externally engineered imperialist contexts. Both are ever evolving, always contaminated and contested, mutually creating and recreating each other".[46]

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[46]   Obioma Nnaemeka, "Mapping Africa Feminism Contested Representation, Gender in Africa." In *Readings in Gender in Africa," edited by* Andrea Cornwall (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 31–40.

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