
IDENTITY REPRESENTATION IN ONLINE SPACES

BY HALIMAT SHODE

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In 2016, I established The Black Muslim Times UK, an independent online platform that quickly became bigger than I had any intentions or understandings of. What took place from its inception was several dialogues and discussions about the place of Black British Muslims in the UK. The Black Muslim Times UK content centred around showcasing Black British Muslims in various fields, from sports to tech to the creative arts. I believed there were so many amazing, talented brothers and sisters of African and African Caribbean backgrounds that deserved to be known to a wider audience.

I have spoken extensively, both in interviews and panel discussions, about the need for Black Muslims in the UK to have their own media platforms, as another issue that I was strongly aware of was the lack of representation in Muslim media publications in addition to mainstream publications and media. For example, I noticed that articles about celebrating Eid were centred around the South Asian/Arab experience. Rarely were African and Caribbean experiences being made reference to in food or cultural clothing. This has been an ongoing challenge with no end in sight; it then becomes a matter of creatively tackling the issue, since the institutions are not serving our needs or acknowledging our potential.

The lack of mainstream media representation is a challenge to Black British Muslims. Only one part of our identity is reflected in British media at any given time; either our race or our Islamic faith; never both together. Although Black British experiences are now better documented through such media stations as the BBC and Channel 4, with airtime given to historians like David Olusoga or academic and broadcaster Emma Dabiri, what is needed is those of African/African Caribbean background and Islamic faith to speak on their experiences and perspective. This leads many to turn to online spaces to see themselves represented and support the ventures of those with independent platforms.

As the internet generation, many of us are turning to the creation of online spaces to affirm and celebrate our identities. I was part of the first video project, Black and Muslim in Britain⁴⁰, created by Saraiya Bah, Sakinah from the nasheed duo Pearls of Islam, and Mohamed Mohamed. This proved to be widely popular nationally and led to a second series of the project. I also had this conversation with sister Khadija, the founder of Being a Muslim Black Girl⁴¹, when she was at the beginning of her journey to establish her own media platform, which has gone on to produce an amazing number of events, work and much more success.

⁴⁰ See Black and Muslim in Britain. (N.d) Home. [YouTube Channel]. YouTube. Retrieved 15 December 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC9nJ7cqWZvB2VDdDhQFGCkg/featured>

However, with the establishment of new projects, both online and offline, it requires a large commitment and sacrifice in time and money. This is one of the major challenges that I believe the Black, African, and African Caribbean British Muslims (BAACBM) in the UK need to tackle. Without economic strength to fund these necessary online and offline contributions, they risk not having longevity and growth beyond their inception.

I believe the key issue of the BAACBM in the UK is lack of established networks that will lead to growth, and expansion. Many of us are starting from the very beginning, with no frameworks or templates to reference. In this regard, I believe that the Black Muslims in the USA are ahead. In February 2020, the NYU Black Muslim Initiative held their second annual Black Muslim symposium; the conference highlighted the rich contributions of Black Muslims to America.

Within the larger British media, many are aware of these conversations and contributions. ITN's show titled, 'Young, British and Muslim' invited myself and a few other Muslim women to discuss our initiatives and projects that we started. However to relate it back to longevity, there is no practice in place within these institutions that will give funding or access to these contributions or projects.

Essentially, it is like starting from scratch all over again whenever there is an individual or group of people that want to contribute to the legacy and history of Black British Muslims in the UK. Although there are a few Muslim organisations such as The Aziz Foundation and the Amal Foundation that fund scholarships and projects that Muslims are establishing, there needs to be a bigger contribution to the work that Black British Muslims are doing. This should take place in the form of ongoing initiatives, in the same way mainstream media does this for campaigns or issues they want to raise awareness for and highlight.

The issue of class also plays into this, alongside faith and race. Many do not have the initial start-up capital to fund these projects and have to resort to crowdfunding, donations and their own incomes to supplement the success of the project. If not for these diverse, creative efforts, many projects would not be able to make a successful start, let alone continue over a long period of time.

The word 'community' has completely shifted and taken on a new meaning with the beginning of the pandemic in 2020. With the loss of access to public spaces, online is now a medium that will be even more instrumental in building the work of BAACBM across the UK. This work is already in action and online contributions can be further re-imagined and revolutionised now that there are no physical boundaries in place. This can be achieved with the right support to propel independent projects and media platforms. There is a large potential for growth and expansion with the right strategy in place to support the efforts and contributions of BAACBM across the UK. As previously mentioned, fully-funded ongoing initiatives are the most sustainable method of maintaining this important work.

⁴¹ See Kuku, Khadija. [Host] (2018-Present). Being a Black Muslim Girl. Audio Podcast. https://open.spotify.com/show/1LgTFqbmDtRU66Qma5jxyT?si=guAAHZ_kT8eFxnE2iyT-iA&nd=1



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She first presented at the first British Islam conference in 2017 held at Amnesty International, she has spoken at universities including Oxford University and SOAS, and chaired a panel discussion at Bradford Literature Festival in 2018.

In 2018, she won the Editor of the Year Award from The UK Black African and African-Caribbean Muslim Awards show.