
BLACK [IN]VISIBILITY & THE MUSLIM VOICE

BY ABDUL HAQQ BAKER

INTRODUCTION

During the 1980s, Blackness in Britain could have been considered as a hegemonic concept, encapsulating other people of colour like South Asians. This '*political Blackness*', according to Professor Tariq Modood (1994), was problematic.

The use of the term 'Black' encourages a 'doublespeak.' It falsely, equates racial discrimination with colour-discrimination and thereby obscures the cultural antipathy to Asians and therefore of the character of the discrimination they suffer.

Such observations were invariably met with hostility and accusations of divisiveness (Sandhu, 2018). On the flip side of the same coin, a similar argument can be made regarding Muslim identity today.

The Black Cause can only, therefore, be successfully represented by those most ethnically and psychologically apposite to address the complexities surrounding it, without dilution or conflation of what may amount to other parallel and occasionally overlapping causes.

Black Muslim communities and the marginalisation – not to mention anti-Black racism – they continue to suffer among larger, more predominant South Asian communities today. The '*doublespeak*' Modood refers to translates to a '*double whammy*' effect for the minority Black Muslim populace, this being anti-Black racism experienced at macro levels from the predominant non-Muslim wider society on the one hand, and micro levels from South Asian Muslim communities on the other. Habeeb Akande argues that:

To be Black and Muslim in the UK is to be part of two marginalised and misunderstood communities. There are misconceptions and issues within both communities and towards each other. There is Islamophobia in Black communities and anti-Blackness in Muslim communities. Both are a result of the idea that each community is monolithic (Akande, 2019).

The requirements for distinct Black Muslim voices and visibility are more important than ever, as the type of effective and overarching leadership that is inclusive of other non-Muslim Black diaspora is essential in order to effectively challenge structural, systemic *and* generational racism that disproportionately affects these same minorities across western societies today.

The very public death of African-American, George Floyd, at the knee of a law enforcement officer, together with the prevailing curfews imposed as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, catapulted this long standing societal scourge of racism into the spotlight, reviving Black Lives

Matter protests worldwide. The *Black Cause* can only, therefore, be successfully represented by those most ethnically and psychologically apposite to address the complexities surrounding it, without dilution or conflation of what may amount to other parallel and occasionally overlapping causes.

The need to examine aspects of British identity from socio-political and socio-cultural perspectives has never been more relevant, especially in light of the resurgence of Black Lives Matter protests across the US and UK following the death of George Floyd. Incidents like these, alongside continuing debates regarding anti-Black, systemic racism and privileges afforded to other ethnic groups are also continuing at microcosmic – yet still significant – levels among Muslim communities.

A QUESTION OF LEGITIMACY: WHO SHOULD REPRESENT BRITISH MUSLIMS?

There is a lack of representation of Muslim converts at societal levels. Muslim converts traverse all spheres of British society and yet their voices are seldom heard against the backdrop of socio-economic, political and religious issues that by and large relate to the predominant South Asian (and of late, increasingly Somali) culture (Baker, 2015).

They remain hidden, or invisible, perhaps because of general social perceptions. As Akande argues, “the general perception in UK society is that Muslims are either South Asian or Arab, but not Black. One is either Black or Muslim, but never both. Growing up, many Black British Muslims would often look to the United States to see a positive representation of Black Muslim figures” (Akande, 2019).

In fact, this observation is equally applicable to Black Muslim voices that only function at localised community levels with few representing their respective ethnic groups or indeed, the wider Muslim populace on the whole. The latter type of representation continues to be dominated by non-Black Muslim diaspora – particularly South Asian entities.

These narratives and institutions extend beyond Black British Muslim communities as they have an even more important and overarching role to play among other non-Muslim Black communities in view of shared understandings and experiences, not to mention other commonalities surrounding issues of racial inequality and injustice pervasive at almost every level of society. While these also affect other communities of colour, Black minorities continue to disproportionately bear the brunt of anti-Black racism. Black Muslim voices have been largely muted due to more vocal representations by the predominantly South Asian Muslim community. While this is unsurprising due to the multifarious and complex social dimensions of this largely progressive group, their representation of almost everything that is supposed to reflect Muslim ‘*Britishness*’ should now be re-examined in view of the growing influence of Black British Muslims. Again, similar to Muslim converts (among whom many are of course also Black, of African Caribbean, African descent) Black Muslim *visibility* and representation are such that engagement and leadership at societal levels with all groups regarding pertinent issues of the day, particularly those relating to racial disparity, discrimination and marginalisation, should be the ambit of Black Muslim voices. Arguably, these voices are better placed than co-religionists

heralding from the more traditional/cultural communities, in the same way that converts fulfil the role as conduits between two socio-cultural paradigms:

Converts may have greater empathy with non-Muslims because of their non-Muslim past and ongoing relationships with their family of origin. They often have a heightened awareness, compared to other Muslims, of how Muslims are viewed by outsiders, so there can be a strongly reflexive element to their discourse (Zebiri, 2007).

CONCLUSION

Without ignoring or diminishing the overwhelmingly positive contributions of these more predominant communities, Black Muslims can also play an invaluable role as conduits between non-Muslim Black communities, wider society and the more culturally orientated Muslim diaspora. Debates relating to the (r)evolving issues around British Muslim participation, representation and leadership must begin to incorporate a wider audience and inclusion of members whose presence, visibility and voice have been – to a greater extent – side-lined and, at most, afforded periodic tokenistic recognition. Black Muslim visibility must be as prominent as their counterparts and no longer be consigned secondary and/or superficial roles at localised, microcosmic levels.

Finally, it is important to reiterate that, while advocating increased Black Muslim visibility, the majority South Asian Muslim voice should not be ignored or marginalised in preference for increased Black representation. Rather, acknowledgement that the latter is an intrinsic factor towards shaping the narratives of British Muslims during this tumultuous period and beyond. *Black Lives Matter as do Black Muslim voices:*

Until we have eliminated racism from our current lives and imaginations, we will have to continue to struggle for the creation of a world-beyond-race. But to achieve it, to sit down at a table to which everyone has been invited, we must undertake an exacting political and ethical critique of racism and of the ideologies of difference. The celebration of difference will be meaningful only if it opens onto the fundamental question of our time, that of sharing, of the common, of the expansion of our horizon (Mbembe, 20013).



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He was also chairman of Brixton Mosque, London between 1994 and 2009 where he successfully countered external extremist threats to the local Muslim community and successfully challenged the destructive propaganda that accompanied it.

His strategic focus involves intervention frameworks that enable strategic community based and statutory collaborations/partnerships to address the multifaceted challenges faced by violent extremism and environments at risk of developing them. His STREET programme was subsequently cited by the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) and British think tank DEMOS, among others, as a model case study. Its effective approach towards youth engagement and intervention led to it winning the Preventing Violent Extremism Innovation award (17th February 2009) for the most innovative youth programme in 2008.

Abdul Haqq's insight, experiences and expertise in successfully challenging violent radicalisation has led to him being widely acknowledged as an authority on violent extremism and counter-radicalisation in the UK as well as an expert in the field of youth intervention projects. He has acted in the capacity of adviser and on occasion, expert witness regarding international terrorism cases.

SURVIVING IN BRITISH POLITICS AS A BLACK MUSLIM HIJABI WOMAN

BY COUNCILLOR RAKHIA ISMAIL