

Intersectional oppression: A reflexive dialogue between Muslim academics and their experiences of Islamophobia and exclusion in UK Higher Education

Arif Mahmud¹  | Maisha Islam² 

¹School of Education, University of Roehampton, London, UK

²Centre for Student Engagement, University of Winchester, Winchester, UK

Correspondence

Arif Mahmud, School of Education, Grove House, Roehampton Lane, London SW15 5PJ, UK.

Email: Arif.Mahmud@roehampton.ac.uk

Abstract

Islamophobia has seen a disturbing rise in British and international contexts; however, we see limited attention being afforded to this in the context of Higher Education (HE), particularly the impacts of this through the lens of staff members. HE continues to frame itself as a post-racial, secular, progressive, and inclusive space, yet is perpetually opposed due to its surreptitious and violent incidences of racism, classism, sexism and ableism. We discuss here, using liberatory-based and autoethnographic methodologies, Muslim staff members' experiences and insights of Islamophobia in UK HE institutions (HEIs)—a severely underrepresented group and largely invisible issue in the academy. We highlight the need to expose, challenge, question, and destabilise the continuous victimisation of Muslims within these spaces and beyond. We unpick issues related to intersectionality and different levels of exclusion by exploring the sense of belonging felt by Muslim staff; specific challenges and episodes of Islamophobia faced; and ways the sector can dismantle Islamophobia and begin developing practices to genuinely support anti-Muslim, anti-racist inclusion and social justice.

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KEYWORDS

Belonging, Higher Education, Islamophobia, Muslim Staff, Muslim Students

1 | AUTHOR POSITIONALITIES

Before beginning our article, we wish to make clear our positionalities as researchers in order to acknowledge the social, historical and political contexts we are located within, ultimately affecting and influencing our orientations (Holmes, 2020). In doing so, we recognise the ethical responsibility placed upon researchers to spend time considering their positionality, but also in ensuring the rigour of this paper by being honest and explicit about how our own stance has interacted with this particular piece (Sikes, 2004).

Arif is a Muslim Bangladeshi second generation British man. He comes from a working-class background, being born and raised in a White mono-cultural non-Muslim area in the South coast of England. His early memories are of poverty, overcrowding and experiences of prejudice and discrimination. Arif has experienced racism and Islamophobia in each stage of his 15+ years in academia having read three degrees (BA, MA, PhD) from UK higher education institutions and taught in universities in three different continents. It is because of this, he is dedicated to supporting the educational experiences and outcomes of those from minoritised groups and eradicating inequalities in education.

Maisha identifies as a British Bangladeshi Muslim woman, coming from a 'working-class' background. These multiple identities have sharply contrasted against the predominantly White and 'middle-class' background Maisha has lived and studied in for the entirety of her life. Maisha has had a complex relationship with education, truly discovering a passion for learning only when discovering sociology as a discipline whilst studying for her A-levels. This passion and sense of intellect furthered when choosing to study sociology at university which has since instilled a dedication to improving racial and religious inequalities within Higher Education. Since entering her career, Maisha has supported and researched areas related to student engagement; student experience; student voice and sense of belonging, particularly using a racially and religiously minoritised lens, on both a local and national level. Alongside a full-time role, Maisha is completing a professional doctorate in Education to further continue this work.

2 | INTRODUCTION

Research has shown that the negative focus on Muslims and Islam around the globe has become significantly mainstreamed and somewhat accepted, not only through the media, but also through political rhetoric and the so-called secular and anti-terrorist laws (Mondon & Winter 2017; Stonebanks, 2009). The institutionalisation of Islamophobia¹ and the narrative surrounding Muslims in society (and subsequently educational settings) has intensified with the disparate rise in the regulation of Islam, usually framed under the banner of counter-terrorism and maintenance of fundamental 'British values'. Mondon and Winter (2017) have further articulated the evolved, flexible and 'progressive' tropes of racism by highlighting the distinction between the illiberal (unacceptable and extreme racist hate of Islamophobia) to the more liberal (acceptable and mainstream) forms in which Islamophobia operates. They have argued that the illiberal/liberal concepts of Islamophobia are not exclusive of one another, but rather are linked by a shared antagonism, target and structure, making it a powerful tool for anti-Muslim hate (ibid). One iteration of this includes the Prevent duty,² which has been argued to disproportionately affect Muslim students and staff within UK HE (Pilkington & Acik, 2020; Saeed, 2018). HE does not operate in a vacuum to wider society and inequalities permeate in the academy with the experiences of 'non-traditional' staff members—from academic to professional service staff—being tainted by institutional racism (Arday & Mirza, 2018; Mahmud & Gagnon, 2018; Rollock, 2021).

In many respects, we see some evidence for certain inequalities being more thoughtfully considered and embedded into institutional ways of working within the UK. This can include nationally recognised schemes such as the

Athena Swan and Race Equality Charter marks whereby HEIs in the UK can voluntarily apply to these schemes as one way to demonstrate their commitment towards gender and racial equality, respectively. Whilst initiatives like these are not without their faults (see: Bhopal & Henderson, 2019), and are certainly at risk of lacking legitimacy in the HE zeitgeist (Johns, 2022), it is not often that we see equally considered discussion related to religious equity. Looking specifically at religion, Aune and Stevenson (2017) argue that the trope of a 'secular' HE still persists. Such assertions are supported in literature which detail how newer universities often display their 'secular badges' (Modood & Calhoun, 2015); the seemingly incompatible and contested relationship between religion and university as a space (Perfect et al., 2019); and discussions related to religion posing a problem for 'secular values' such as academic freedom and freedom of speech (Stevenson, 2021).

Nevertheless, some research has begun to demonstrate a growing commitment from universities, particularly those that have a sizeable Muslim student population, to invest into this area. For example, resources from London Metropolitan University (UK) and Coventry University (UK) have shown that operating under the guise of the 'secular university space' has translated to barriers for Muslims specifically in observing religion on campus, whether through utilising prayer spaces, religious holidays, or Halal food provisions in addition to career progression and religious and racial bias which operates in subtle ways within HE settings (Akel, 2021; Aune et al., 2020; Ramadan, 2017; Scott-Baumann et al., 2020).

3 | THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION

The institutional elements mentioned here create the context for this paper in which to draw attention to the lived experiences of early career Muslim academic staff members, provoked by the lack of research in this area. Despite the increasing attention paid towards religious inclusion, and the benefits of this for students (Codioli McMaster, 2020; Dumangane, 2017; Park & Bowman, 2015), little is known about Muslim staff members as an underrepresented group, with numerical data concerning Muslim women academics largely being absent (Ramadan, 2021). Where over 90% of Muslim staff members also belong to Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds (Advance HE, 2020) in the UK, it is only reasonable to assume that these experiences are further marred by race yet need to be regarded as distinctly different given the element of religion (for a deeper discussion on the racialisation of Muslims and Muslim identity formation see: Garner & Selod, 2015; Gholami, 2021; Kundnani, 2014; Meer & Modood, 2008; Selod & Embrick, 2013).

We also wish to underscore a Muslim female perspective, where authors have previously highlighted the complex agency used in achieving success in academia whilst negotiating through various identities and structures (Jamal Al-deen, 2019). Whilst these are powerful reminders that Muslim women in and outside of academia display an incredible level of resilience in the face of Islamophobic, patriarchal and racist structures, the toll of subverting multiple gazes is understandably exhausting. This is excellently detailed by Ahmad-Chan (2020) who speaks of the never-ending job of disproving the 'oppressed Muslim woman' narrative. Additionally, women of colour in the academy working to advance goals of equity and diversity do so in the confines of institutional cultures that determine the value of this work (Ahmed, 2007a, 2007b). We also find a particular gap for Black Muslim women (and racialised others) to develop methodologies that examine these structures against the White backdrop of academia (Johnson, 2020). Thus, there is a labour and necessity to this work which should not predominantly sit with those already marginalised.

It is here we invite you into a conversation between Muslim academic colleagues to provide further insight into the minefield we must constantly navigate. Using lenses of belonging and power, we unpick these issues exploring the below questions:

1. How has our Muslim identity impacted on our belonging and experiences within the HE setting?
2. What challenges, barriers, and experiences of Islamophobia have we faced as visibly Muslim staff members?

3. What suggestions and recommendations could we provide to HE to better support and increase the representation Muslim staff (both in the UK and elsewhere)?

4 | OUR REFLEXIVE DIALOGUE

We use an autoethnographic reflexive approach, utilising conceptual tools commonly adopted by Critical Race Theory (CRT) to speak about the marginalised experiences we face as Muslim academic staff in UK HE. Adopting an autoethnographic approach entails writing retrospectively and selectively of one's experience of holding a particular identity in a particular culture (Ellis et al., 2010). Such an approach has proved useful particularly for building knowledge about religious and intersectional marginalisation, where Johnson's (2020) autoethnographic account sees her use of dialogue and the concept of double consciousness to '*assist in researching experiences of racialisation as more than a fixed Other*' (p. 92). As a Black Muslim woman, her dialogue pertinently contributes to and engages with Black feminist thought. As a result, this method can provide important intimate insights into oppression, domination and exploitation (Clough, 2000). More broadly, an autoethnographic approach provides myriad benefits for researchers, where Custer (2014) details seven ways in which its use as a transformative research method includes: the ability to foster empathy; inviting and honouring subjectivity; embodying creativity and innovation.

On the point of creativity, we relate a further benefit of this approach in enabling a 'sociological imagination' (Mills, 1959) to further our understandings of the social world and the roles we take as sociologists within it. As contended by Cook (2014), connecting the personal with the cultural is in itself an application of the sociological imagination, '*whereby personal troubles (biography) can be linked with and understood through public issues (social structures)*' (p. 271). In doing so intersects with another opportunity presented when using an autoethnographic approach. An acute awareness of 'relational ethics' provides researchers with an ability to not only examine their vulnerable selves and reveal the broader context of our experiences, but also acknowledge the deeply complex realities of how best to represent 'real characters' whilst attempting to heal and grow from collective pain (Ellis, 2007). Indeed, there is a real craft involved to using this research method.

Therefore, whilst certain autoethnographic writing must often defend itself against claims such as being self-obsessive (Delamont, 2009), or whether there is the space and value in research and sociological work to bring 'the personal' into the fore (Goode, 2006), we argue that there are sociological benefits and indeed value to adopting such an approach. Others have highlighted the therapeutic nature to writing personal stories, not only for researchers but also for readers (Wright, 2009). Namely, in taking an autoethnographic approach for us as minoritised early careers researchers that are precariously positioned in UK HE, we not only align ourselves to the work of other critical race theorists but also aim to uproot hegemonic understandings of our identities in the hopes of 'reclaim[ing] representational space' and ultimately create more equitable educational spaces for similar others (Chávez, 2012, p. 342).

We take inspiration from the many academics who have then used dialogue to shed light to their stories, be it to explore tensions in researcher relationships (Hill & Holyoak, 2011), build knowledge of how students experience and respond to racism (Rodriguez, 2010), or simply tap into a level of intimacy that an essay could do not do justice in delivering the same emotive message (hooks, 1994). Indeed, alternative and liberatory methodologies (such as CRT and feminism) offer some of the most marginalised communities an opportunity to have voice, re-story critical incidents in the form of 'confessional writing' (hooks, 1999), and create counter-spaces to the oppression faced that is so often rendered invisible by the dominance of Whiteness in HEIs (Endo, 2021; Solorzano et al., 2000; Thorpe, 2021). We humbly wish to add to these spaces in an effort to recognise similar others. The unstructured dialogue was undertaken virtually during the Spring term of 2021 and was transcribed and edited in the Summer term of 2021.

(MI): AM, thank you so much for initiating this space for conversation. At times, it feels that simply by virtue of being Muslim in the academy brings with it a deeply solitary experience that many individuals may not fully empathise with.

Is this the same for you? And how has your Muslim identity impacted on your belonging and experiences within the setting?

(AM): With regards to my Muslim identity and belonging in HE, I have always felt uneasy. Being a visibly South Asian Muslim male academic, there's not many of us, and even though I try to 'fit in' by repressing some of my religious identity markers, I continue to stick out in most places in and around academia. There are few that understand my views and beliefs, and this makes me hyper-vigilant about what I can say or how I can act. But, even though I lack this sense of belonging or guidance in how to navigate these secular White spaces, I also feel a significant feeling of responsibility extended to fellow Muslim staff and students - that I need to positively represent Muslims and to support our Muslim students and staff, as I feel they will not be understood. So, there is this multifaceted performance. On one hand, I try to show the HE community that we as Muslims belong and bring value to these spaces but on the other hand, I try and show the Muslim community that I am not selling out my values or my religion to be in HE and that they would (or should) not need to either. I feel in those moments, there is this intense, overwhelming, burdening pressure.

How about yourself, how does your visibly Muslim identity impact on your belonging within the higher education setting?

MI: Yes, I definitely empathise with that dramaturgical performance (Goffman, 1990), particularly with a so-called "Muslim ambassador badge" pressed upon us. I also feel a level of intersectional oppression (see: Crenshaw, 1989) tied with all my identity markers. As soon as I consciously realise that I am the only hijab-wearing Muslim woman in the room or person of colour, it's a hard sensation to shake. As someone still early in their career and undertaking a professional doctorate, I too am unsure of where to seek guidance, especially when encountering microaggressions, racism or Islamophobia. The mental tennis match that ensues is deeply burdensome—'Am I overthinking it? Did that really just happen?' More often than not, I rarely internalise such treatment in the moment and will continue to sit in meetings with colleagues in a state of discomfort, which only ever increases as the moment passes. How can you *truly* belong in these spaces?

At the same time, I have spoken with female Muslim students about these experiences of being 'the lone Muslim hijabi'³ and some have described their mere presence as inherently counter hegemonic. They feel they have the potential power to change perceptions and challenge stereotypes. Again, I empathised with this feeling. For example, a former lecturer allowed me to teach two seminars on the Sociology of Religion, where I explored the dichotomy of Muslim women being represented in print media to social media. Whilst I appreciated the potential positive impact my seminar had, where I'm sure these students had probably never been taught by a hijab-wearing lecturer, as you said, it is a lot to ask for—even for the most passionate of individuals fighting for equity and social justice.

That passion is what equips you to be mentally prepared to expect micro-aggressive critiques and Islamophobic rhetoric when you release that report looking into the experiences of 'Asian' students (Islam, 2021), or that educational blog advocating universities to remember their prayer spaces for their students during the COVID-19 pandemic (Islam, 2020), for example. As a result, there is much emotional labour of knowing almost everything you do in the academic space is mediated/impacted by both your religion and race. Anecdotally speaking, you and I both know that these are experiences that keep our brothers and sisters⁴ from joining the academy or seeing it as a space that is theirs to belong to.

AM: I agree. At times, there is this disconnect between being seen in these physical spaces as the only visible Muslim academic, but simultaneously feeling invisible, overlooked and not listened to. For me, it always goes back to maintaining the status quo of HE. The system tokenizes and celebrates you when it suits their interests (Castagno & Lee, 2007). We see it with the Black Lives Matter movement, Black History Month, International Women's Day, Islamic Awareness week, but most of the other times when it does not suit inter-

ests, or it is not 'mainstream' or 'popularised', most HEI's do not want to hear it. I am always questioning when to conceal and when to show my Muslim identity in UK HE. When is it okay or safe? How will it be interpreted? How will it hinder me? I am always worried about saying the right thing. Alternatively, in certain situations, if I am not downplaying or condemning my religion enough then I will not be socially approved or publicly and academically recognised (Qureshi, 2020).

MI: Our struggles are not also viewed as acceptable struggles behind this veil (Du Bois, 2019), shutting us from normative HE. For example, I remember proposing the need to include a religiously minoritised student representative to sit on the university's Student Advisory Council—a space for students to meet with the executive leaders of the university for consultative purposes. The group holds student representatives from across the faculties and certain underrepresented⁵ groups. When reviewing the group membership, and specifically my proposal for including a religiously minoritised member of the Council, one individual questioned the need of having this as we had just approved and appointed a Black, Asian and minority ethnic student representative. Whilst this gross conflation was challenged by myself and others, it is emblematic of how far we need to go in being fully inclusive to Muslim (and other) staff and student voices, especially in decision-making committees and groups.

AM: We've talked about the lack of representation and being 'othered' but what other challenges or barriers have you faced as a visibly Muslim staff?

MI: Being a first-generation university student has also meant being unaccustomed to social capital that others can use in the academy. There is only so far that emotional support from your family unit can take you. Whilst necessarily helpful, it does not provide you with connections; someone to proofread your paper or guide you when your manuscript is rejected. I see this more as a personal challenge rather than systemic barrier however, as I have met incredible White, non-Muslim Allies who have supported my professional and academic journey.

As an extension to the point made about role models, as a doctoral student who wants to write about these issues or use CRT, I must go outside of my institution to find that level of support. Given my geographical location and institution being predominantly White, the onus is on me to find support and expertise. Further speaking to the colonial ways of the academy, most academics are expected to have a basic understanding of classical traditional theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu. However, the pioneers of CRT are not considered core. We thus see a double standard in that it is (usually) academics of colour with interests in race who must be proficient in *both* sets of knowledge.

Another systemic barrier I face includes the feeling of needing to have a 'palatable' disposition when advocating for Muslim students and students of colour. Aligning to the concept of interest convergence within CRT (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015), there is an acute awareness that change is only evident when satisfying the needs of dominant groups. As a minoritized individual fighting for equity, you must think strategically of 'the long game'—this is a lesson that I had to learn quite quickly. What about your challenges and barriers, AM?

AM: I hear you. Being a Muslim academic, in a so called 'post-racial' space, there is still covert and overt Islamophobia. As a lecturer, I have experienced it both from students and staff. I have had students walk out of my class when I have been talking about British Muslim experiences in society, and other students rolling their eyes in contempt. Disappointingly, the topics of these classes have usually been around wider social justice, equality and diversity issues. However, when we talk about Muslim equality and fairness, for example, non-participation in non-Muslim celebrations, or women's rights to wear what they want, it seems certain groups or communities are not to be included in these allowances of freedom of equality. I have had a student turn around and say "Oh, you would say something like that", when defending the rights of Muslim women. I feel some students are becoming more brazen with minimizing religious practices under the banner of free speech, especially with the increase and popularisation of ethnonationalism and the far right in society (Mondon & Winter, 2020; Solomos et al., 2020). Some students have started to understand and internalise that there will be minimal/no repercussions; that most people will not speak out against such acts of Islamophobia whether in the classroom among their peers, within the institution, or sector as a whole. This undoubtedly shows how structural Islamophobia informs the personal encounters with it.

With regards to experiences of Islamophobia among staff members, it is much more micro- and macro-aggressions, covert and passive aggressive. On one side, when Muslims are accused or do something against the norm, I am the first person that they turn to condemn these Muslim students' behaviour or other acts that have happened in society. This is solely done to augment power over Muslims (Qureshi, 2020). I have had staff members feel the need to enlighten me on so-called 'British values' (for a critique of British values in education see: Lander, 2016; Lockley-Scott, 2019) even though I am a born and raised British national, and even question, correct and explain my own experiences of racism in HE.

Similarly, myself and other male Muslim academics constantly receive suspicious gazes when interacting with traditionally aged undergraduate White female students in informal learning spaces. I feel this stems from the stereotypes around Muslim men and the rhetoric that is spewed by tabloid newspapers of Asian Muslim men, grooming and other forms of terrorism, and these gazes make you feel judged and suffocated. Can you see how these intersections of our identities make for a cocktail of oppression? We just want to do our jobs to the best of our abilities, yet are bombarded with these continuous Islamophobic micro-aggressions. I honestly think my tiredness and trauma of these experiences have suppressed so much more.

MI: Even our informal spaces in HE are imbued with daily micro-aggressive acts and Islamophobia. During a staff away day, I had a colleague querying the practice of arranged marriages yet doing so in a way where she was convincing herself that it was equivalent to forced marriage. As I explained the role of parents in finding potential matches, she had impersonated how my mother would do this using a stereotypical Indian accent. It is upsetting that what I take away from this experience is anger at myself for not immediately identifying this as a form of racism, and the fact that I never received as little as an apology.

We know in principle that around a quarter of students of colour experience racial harassment (Universities UK, 2020) but there must be a recognition that the majority of these cases will never be reported. I also know that those brave enough to speak out will far likely undergo further trauma and repercussion than the original perpetrator—there is no incentive or safeguard for us to report Islamophobic and racist incidences which I believe to be the biggest institutional barrier.

AM: I completely agree. We've talked so much about experiences of micro- and macro-aggressions, racism, Islamophobia, and I know the onus should not be on us to provide the solutions, but what do you think UK HEIs can do better to support Muslim staff?

MI: Firstly, in the same way we speak about the importance of racial and gender diversity on senior committees, this needs to be extended to religious diversity. How often do we hear of the issues facing Muslim students and staff, simply due to the fact that there is no representation at these levels? If I was not in university groups with senior members of staff who hold the power to strongly influence and enact change, I would be shouting into an abyss that would never grant further prayer space provision (for example). If universities firstly accept that there are institutional barriers stunting our growth and progression, provide a space to express our concerns and actively listen to them, these are first steps in an anti-Islamophobic approach.

AM: You're right. Senior leadership not only need to disaggregate Black, Asian and minority ethnic staff members, but also collect and evaluate data in a more nuanced way including data on Muslim staff and students within their institutions. The latter will identify and subsequently place value on Muslims in HE. Once we listen to Muslim voices, we can begin to tailor the support that is necessary. Institutions need to adopt the working definition of Islamophobia in order to begin to eradicate it, and place similar value on it in accordance with other equality and diversity policies. Institutions need to be more proactive about the mechanisms used for reporting issues such as Islamophobia and racism, which should go hand-in-hand with limiting and countering the negative use of the Prevent policy on Muslim staff and students (Jenkins et al., 2022; Kiai, 2017). The process must be more transparent, whilst not persecuting and unfairly treating the victim. I have heard numerous Muslims say they do not report these issues because they feel that Islamophobia has become normalised within academia, that it is not taken as serious as other forms of racism and discrimination, and they do not trust the system to support them or do anything about it. On the contrary, in such instances,

Muslim staff and students feel they will be looked down upon, seen as 'troublemakers' and the religion of Islam smeared as uncooperative in maintaining the 'status quo'.

And I would like to add that equality is not the same as equity. As we have mentioned already, British Muslim academics are generally first-generation, working class and from racially minoritized backgrounds. These bring all sorts of repercussions with the lack of social, economic and cultural capital that is required to not only survive, but thrive within UK HE. There are distinct, specific, nuanced and particular needs of minoritised groups, and they are going to vary accordingly. I remember an example of when I went to a conference, and I asked the organisers if they had a Muslim prayer room. I remember the organisers replying, "No, we don't discriminate between religions. We haven't provided a space for Muslims as we haven't provided a space for other religions". She tried to frame it in an 'equality blanket', and I think universities do similar things as I think they do not want to be seen to be pandering to Muslim communities as it might offend and anger the wider racist society.

MI: That's a really good point, especially in reference to prayer spaces. Prayer spaces are key in invoking a sense of belonging for Muslim students and staff (Islam & Mercer-Mapstone, 2021), yet I have encountered spaces that have used the 'equality of access' principle. Let us be clear that equality of access can still result in inequitable outcomes. As soon as we start realising this and naturally label prayer spaces on conference programmes or embed Halal food options in the lunch options, we feel like we belong. I've only had the pleasure of experiencing this at one academic conference (The 2019 Gender and Education Association Annual Conference), which was my first enabling experience of seeing myself in the academy, be surrounded by collegially and academic excellence that looked like me and/or supported me. Normalising these aspects are what pushed me into pursuing a doctoral degree. These are the micro and macro-level actions all universities need to be actively endorsing.

AM: Exactly! Building from your experience, some of the most collegial, kindest, supportive people that I have met in HE have been non-Muslims. There are people in HE who truly understand equity and try their best to be inclusive in all senses of the word. These acts of consideration and kindness have immense positive psychological impact, but it cannot be down to individuals when we need systematic change. I think Muslims and minoritised groups need to understand our worth! We have every right to be in these spaces. We should not surrender or need to surrender our religion. We should be steadfast in our beliefs, our values, our principles. We should not think that if we renounce our Muslim-ness, that we will have a better chance to fit in and be accepted within the academy; that we need to dissociate our levels of faith with social approval and public recognition.

MI: Definitely! I am proud of my career thus far and can honestly say that I have not compromised on my faith. As a Muslim woman who wears a hijab, I empathise with those women who have removed their hijab or have thought about doing so (Akel, 2021). The work we do is incredibly personal as we advocate for our identities, but one must never feel they must compromise or soften their Muslim-ness. However, in age where we as Muslims are constantly under surveillance, scrutinised and made to feel other (Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2020; Glapka, 2018; Qurashi, 2017), these feelings are completely justified, and universities must take some responsibility for ensuring this is not the case. Show your Muslim students and staff that it is okay to bring/be their full selves and provide them with same level of relentless welcome (Felten & Lambert, 2020) that we show non-Muslim students and staff—press statements have their place but they are meaningless without action (Ahmed, 2007a, b).

5 | CONCLUDING REMARKS

Understanding and acknowledging Islamophobic concepts and practices are fundamental if we are to challenge, question, destabilise, deconstruct and empower minoritized Muslim groups in the UK and global higher education. An extensive exploration of the alignments between CRT, intersectionality, anti-racism, and anti-Muslim processes would

be an indispensable avenue for future discourses in order to offer new opportunities for future study and practice. In this dialogue, we have attempted to briefly set the foundation of such themes by way of critically reflecting on the experiences of Islamophobia and exclusion in UK HE by British Muslim academics, partly due to the lack of research in this area. In doing so, we have given a platform to our voices which are often not heard and have tried to expose some common yet troubling incidences that Muslim staff face in UK HE. This, in itself, represents the construction of alternative theory and epistemologies which have served historically marginalised groups (see: Collins, 2000).

Whilst this dialogue has provided us with representational space, we concur that storytelling should not be reduced as simple anecdotal accounts; it provides a contextual lens to question norms and practices and thus should move readers into appropriate action (see: Aguirre, 2000). Our call to action is for those in HE to take heed of these experiences and work towards genuine inclusivity (Hailu et al., 2018). This dialogue demonstrates how Islamophobia manifests at both the micro- and macro-level for Muslim staff, and some of our recommendations for tackling these. These relate to how institutional policies such as Prevent, or counter-intuitive blanket policies have been enacted in ways that disproportionately affect religiously minoritized staff. What we describe here is not understood to be isolated incidents but a series of perverse issues that position Muslim staff as interlopers in academia—never fully belonging nor feeling welcomed in both UK and international contexts (Almaki et al., 2016; Ramadan, 2021).

Further implications of our joint reflexive dialogue have allowed us to circumvent some ethical issues present in social research through co-production. In collaborating and sharing our misgivings, we have not only '*found the understandings, feelings, insight, and stories that emerged and evolved during our interaction*' as incredibly compelling but our voluntary participation and deep commitment to the purpose of the research meant that certain ethical tensions apparent in other forms of research were not as prominent (Ellis, 2007, p. 20); we did not need to intrude on or risk others' vulnerability yet our commitment to represent our communities outweighed our own sense of vulnerability. Our dialogue resonates strongly to the way in which Johnson (2020) speaks about exploring a double consciousness, by virtue of being a Black Muslim woman. Similar to her dialogue, we both recognise our similar yet different experiences (particularly, our gendered experiences) and importantly gained a shared recognition in one another which we now use as a point of empowerment—not only to us but also to our fellow Muslim staff traversing academia.

We acknowledge the limitations presented in our dialogue, which extends to most autoethnographic work, related to reliability, generalisability and validity that is, as highly individualised pieces of work, autoethnography pose contentions to traditional research paradigms assessing these qualities (Holt, 2003). However, the use of traditional criteria to evaluate qualitative contributions have illustrated that alternative criteria (Allen-Collinson & Hockey, 2008) or adjusted understandings of what constitutes reliable, generalisable and valid research are required to appropriately underscore (and not undermine) the contributions autoethnographic accounts make to their respective fields (Ellis et al., 2010).

Finally, we would implore other critical researchers to make use of autoethnography as a research method to strengthen their work. Indeed, similar 'othered' researchers have reported their experiences in order to make a critical commentary of the state of educational affairs. For example, Chávez's (2012) personal accounts of working in elite institutions in America enabled her to highlight certain inequities and problematise the economic and cultural privilege afforded to others. As a Chicana researcher, she describes the combination of CRT and autoethnography as 'the perfect marriage' which she had no choice but to use. Other critical researchers have also been able to adopt a co-autoethnography approach in order to make sense of their identity and practice. Coia and Taylor (2013) exemplify this by questioning what they originally thought it meant to be a feminist educator. In acknowledging how our own positionalities are in a constant state of flux, the appeal to using such an approach for other critical researchers enables us to be comfortable with this, given the complexities emerging from our lived experiences, and in turn influence our work towards ultimate goals of social justice.

Owing to the core purpose of our dialogue, we have also drawn parallels made from Du Bois' (2019) concept of double consciousness used to describe a 'twoness' in identities of being in academia whilst Muslim, which has given us (and hopefully readers) a profound insight. Du Bois' notion of 'the veil' and exposure of this also becomes a rather apt metaphor in the context of a hijab-wearing Muslim woman. His contributions, and that of the aforementioned tools and scholarly writings offered, have certainly allowed for the development of methodologies and theoretical

insights afforded in this paper which seek to understand our resistance (Meer, 2019; Weiner, 2018). By challenging the limitations and boundaries that now characterise HEIs, we hope to further promote acts of self-reflection (beginning with ourselves), spark continued discussion and research, recognise unity and develop solidarity in order to not only delegitimise Islamophobia but the veil of racism as a whole.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

ORCID

Arif Mahmud  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2125-4723>

Maisha Islam  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5763-2381>

ENDNOTES

- ¹ The All-Party Parliamentary Group (2018) defines Islamophobia as being “rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness”. In using this definition, we recognise that it does not hold a universally agree-upon status.
- ² The Prevent duty forms as part of the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act (2015) which places a duty on higher education institutions in England and Wales “to have due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism”.
- ³ ‘Hijabi’ is an informal term used to describe hijab-wearing Muslim women.
- ⁴ The term ‘brothers’ and ‘sisters’ is commonly used within Islam and by Muslims to refer to fellow adherents of the global faith.
- ⁵ The term ‘underrepresented’ is commonly used to refer to groups who share a particular characteristic and report gaps in having equal access, success and progression from and within HE.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Arif Mahmud is a Muslim Bangladeshi second generation British man. He comes from a working-class background, being born and raised in a White mono-cultural non-Muslim area in the South coast of England. His early memories are of poverty, overcrowding and experiences of prejudice and discrimination. Arif has experienced racism and Islamophobia in each stage of his 15+ years in academia having read three degrees (BA, MA, PhD) from UK higher education institutions and taught in universities in three different continents. It is because of this, he is dedicated to supporting the educational experiences and outcomes of those from minoritised groups and eradicating inequalities in education.

Maisha Islam identifies as a British Bangladeshi Muslim woman, coming from a 'working-class' background. These multiple identities have sharply contrasted against the predominantly White and 'middle-class' background Maisha has lived and studied in for the entirety of her life. Maisha has had a complex relationship with education, truly discovering a passion for learning only when discovering sociology as a discipline whilst studying for her A-levels. This passion and sense of intellect furthered when choosing to study sociology at university which has since instilled a dedication to improving racial and religious inequalities within Higher Education. Since entering her career, Maisha has supported and researched areas related to student engagement; student experience; student voice and sense of belonging, particularly using a racially and religiously minoritised lens, on both a local and national level. Alongside a full-time role, Maisha is completing a professional doctorate in Education to further continue this work.

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