

Social Construction of Self and Identity among the Muslim Women in Sonitpur District of Assam

**A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PART FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

KAUSAR QURASHI

Registration No: TZ155836 of 2015



**Department of Sociology
School of Humanities and Social Sciences
Tezpur University
Napaam, Tezpur**

December 2022

Chapter 6

Conclusion

Assam is a home to diverse Muslim communities, and the women within these categories may have differing experiences. However, they all belong to the larger single identity of Muslim women. Social constructions of such identities are far more complex than it appears to be. Multiple, intersectional socio-spatial factors interact with each other in such a process. This study is located in the larger debates on women and Islam in a global context that argues for decentering western feminism to understand the lived Islam. The debate on understanding the everyday life of Muslim women across the world is complex. Western feminists argue that the practices within Islam represent the oppressive structure of the religion against women. The Islamic feminist scholars argue for decentering feminism to understand the life world of Muslim women in the non-western context. This debate has gained wider attention in the last four decades since the seminal work of Fatima Mernissi in 1975 in Morocco. Since then, there have been conceptual refinement and confluences of secular or Islamic feminism worldwide. But there are scanty works on the lived experiences of Indian women in Islam, especially in the Assam context. This study aims to fill this gap in the literature and make it compelling to undertake this study.

The study is informed by the idea that one's self and identity is embodied and become part of the lived experiences. Therefore this study attempted to map out the complex process of social construction of self and identity through the lived experiences of body among the Muslim women with the following objectives; i) To understand the process of the social construction of self and identity through the everyday life of diverse categories of Muslim women in Tezpur, Assam; ii) to look into the interactional space available for women in their domestic and public spaces. How do they negotiate these spaces and perform their self and identity?; iii) to understand the significance of the materiality of the body in their

construction of self and identity; iv) to understand the process of 'living' Islam in their intimate relational context, primarily through marriage and divorce practices.

Selection of research area

The area of research has been selected purposively based on the linguistic categories. The data were collected through in depth interviews. The interviews were conducted in four villages of Barika Chuburi, Saikia Chuburi Muslim village, Beseria Muslim village and Bhujkhuwa Chapori village. The interviews were collected from Muslim women as well as from some of the men. The data received suggested that the experiences and performances of women are not one and the same. It goes beyond the accepted difference normally thought of. They have multiplicity in their performances which are interactional and intersectional. Multiple intersectional socio-spatial factors interact with each other in the process of construction of identity. The linguistic and historical backgrounds of the Muslim women categories produce different life experiences of all three communities. Linguistically these Muslim populations of Assam consist of the Assamese speaking Muslims, the Bengali speaking Muslims, and the Hindi speaking Muslims. The Assamese speaking Muslims consist of the descendants of war prisoners taken captive throughout the Muslim invasions, the local people who converted and the immigrants i.e., the Muslim artisans and learned men imported by the then Ahom rulers. The Hindi-speaking Muslims moved to Assam during the first part of the 20th century and after independence mainly from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. They mostly speak Bhojpuri, Urdu and Hindi. The Bengali speaking Muslims are immigrants from East Pakistan /Bangladesh. The Muslims of Assam doesn't consist of a homogeneous category but are quite diverse in their outlook. As such, the social background of these Muslim communities varies from one another. The status of women within these various categories is further deplorable.

What does the thesis argue?

The lived experiences of the Muslim women in this study suggest that the construction of self and identity has to be contextualised to the wider socio-spatial locations and their intersections. Lived experiences of gender and religion intersect with sectarian ideologies, linguistic variations, class locations, generations, geographies, and politics of othering, etc. This study critiques the dominant white western feminist and modernist science logic that shade all Muslim women in the same paint as the victims of religious orthodoxy. The

complex and intertwining experiences of Muslim women in the study area suggest an alternative understanding of their sociabilities. So, they are both secular and religious, they are both universal and local, they are both modern and traditional, they are both gendered, they have both exploitative and emancipating experiences. Thus, painting them as any of these is an oversimplification of gender and religion in its binaries. It is also an attempt to essentialise the Muslim women's experience or their construction of self and identity within the 'unique' intersection of Muslim (Religion) and Women (Gender). This essentialising approaches reproduce the dominant narratives of all 'Muslim women are oppressed. Therefore, this study offers an alternative understanding of the constructions of self and identity through their lived experiences of 'spaces' 'bodies' and 'relations'. This suggests that experiences' complexities are available in its multiplicities of socio-spatial locations.

The complexities of these lived experiences make it complicated to arrive at a generalised pattern of the social construction of self and identity. However, there are broader contours in the experiences in each of the three linguistic categories of Muslim women explored in this study. Assamese Muslim women's experiences offer a very different articulation to the whole debate of Islam and women across the globe. Performance of religion through its universal identity markers in the public spaces are relatively less among them. Instead, allegiance to the cultural representations of Assamese nationalism is more evident among them. Such representations and their meaning-making process embody a unique constitution of self and identity among the Assamese Muslim Women. It is challenging to identify Assamese Muslim women in the public space for their dress or makeup. They perform their bodies through the Assamese cultural representations, both contemporary and traditional. However, the domestic space is influenced by the religious value system. They are monogamous in their marital relations, and rarely go for divorce like any other communities in the mainstream Assamese society. Such an allegiance to 'Assamese nationalism' needs to be read with the historical and contemporary politics of identity. There is a conscious attempt by the community leaders to prevent the entry of 'fundamentalist' ideologies into their system. Instead, they take the privilege as progressive Assamese Muslims.

The Hindi speaking north Indian Muslim women embody a pan Islamic self and identity both in their public and private spaces. Their performance in the public as well as private

spaces are structured by the religious value system. The gendered relations are structured around patriarchal strictures. Woman's agency have the least autonomy among these communities. However, the new generation of girls within these communities enjoy better autonomy than the 'imported' brides from North India in these families. They consciously reproduce the North Indian religious value system through their mosques, religious practices and importing 'good' wives for their sons from North India. Thus, their relational matrices within the family, with the neighbourhood communities and to that of their ancestral location, are complex and hybrid. There is fluidity across these contexts, and the women are competent to switch over as they navigate these diverse contexts.

The Bengali speaking muslim women's experience an existential question in the current political contexts. They felt alienated from the mainstream Assamese communities, including the Muslims. There is a growing sense of fear and anxiety about citizenship that ominous their lives. They neither belong to Assam nor Bangladesh, and the only solace they find is in their religious congregation. They perform their religion in public and private ardently with few exceptions for their workplace comfortability. Their body carries the symbolic representations of their religion, the space they belong to, and the language that invokes their Bangladeshi origin. Their intimate relations are plagued by marital disharmonies, polygamy, and multiple talaqs.

Chapter themes

The first chapter is the introductory chapter which outlines the context and the research problem. This chapter focuses on the objectives, conceptual framework of the study and methods applied in conducting the research. This chapter includes the research questions to be sought through abductive research strategy and a summarising review of the major literature that forms the study's base. The second chapter provides an account of the field and its historical and socio-cultural setting. This chapter discusses the This chapter has a detailed description of the entry to the village, its demographic settings, the oral history of the villages from the older community members, and the literature.

Interactional space of Muslim women; domestic and public

The third chapter focuses on the interactional space available for Muslim women in their domestic and public spaces. In the studied villages among different categories of women,

the lived experiences of domestic and public spaces interact with each other and are often overlaps. Beyond the linguistic and religious registries of these women the experiences need to be located in terms of intersectional and interactional social locations of Class (of the family at one level and autonomy/control of economic resources at another level), Sectarian ideologies, Geography (the physical space of the community and its culture), Age (youth/ middle aged/ elderly), Education, Employment & Exposure (to the world outside the home) Immigrant status/doubtful citizen and the Historicity of their community.

Muslim women: Emboding Identity

The dominant interpretation of the Islamic shariat suggests that women have to cover their entire body and not invite men's attraction except for her husband. For them, the women's sexuality is a threat to the social order and therefore controlling sexuality become important for the social order. A burqa is a dress that covers the whole body of the individual, and it emerged as a pan Islamic dress code for women worldwide. But in the studied villages Burqa as a compulsory dressing style in the public spaces prevails only among the upper-class Hindi speaking women. Many fluidities and hybrid forms of dressing patterns are available among the Assamese speaking Muslim women. The choice and style of dressing also loudly talk about their multiple social locations of class, age, neighborhood, workplace, etc. Beyond the religious prescription of complete covering of the body through *burqa* or similar dresses, the field offered multiple contexts of hybrid performances of dress.

Relational space of Muslim woman: Marriage and divorce

Chapter five looks into the relational space of Muslim women through marriage and divorce. This chapter also discusses how Islam is practiced among women through their marriage and divorce. These women are exposed to different and multiple value systems. While performing their religion, Muslims turn to the agencies of religion like the Maulabis and Muftis. They interpret the religious texts to solve their problems and perform their religion. There is a dominant argument that the position of women in a society is always determined by the religious manuscripts and setting up of religious and cultural norms through institutions.

Marriage and divorce are the sole authority of the men given by the Shariyat, but there are conditions. Islam allows divorce if circumstances warrant or necessitate it, indeed reluctantly neither liking nor recommending it. Bengali speaking Muslims have different households following different patriarchal values. Polygamy is one such practice that gives us a glimpse of the patriarchal values followed by this community. These practices imply self and identity of women in this community. In all three categories of women, interviews showed polygamous relationships only among the Bengali Speaking Muslims. The polygamous structure is being embodied in the lives of this category of women, and that it is a common trend that occurs in their lives.

Major Findings

The other major findings of the study are discussed below.

Gender & Patriarchy

The Muslim women embody the gendered sociability and are product such gendered socialisation. Their experiences are different for being a woman in their respective community. The overarching patriarchal structure across the gender influences such lived experiences. They often make meaning out of these hegemonic discourses as responsible for marginal location vis-a-vis their male counterparts. This meaning-making is more salient primarily when they attribute meanings from the gendered division of domestic or private space. However, the discriminatory experiences in the public space are often located for being 'Muslim' than being a woman.

Lived experiences of spaces: domestic and public

The lived experiences of Muslim Women in their domestic or public life need to be located beyond these women's linguistic and religious registries. The experiences need to be located in terms of intersectional and interactional social locations of Class, Sectarian ideologies, Geography, Immigrant status/doubtful citizen, Historicity of their community, Age, Education, Employment and Exposure

Dressing the body

Many fluidities and hybrid forms of dressing patterns are available among the Assamese speaking Muslim women. The older women often clad in mekhela chador when they publicly claim their Assamese Identity loudly. However, the nuances of draping the mekhela chador also enable her to claim her Islamic identity in their way by partly covering their head!. For the individual subjectivities, these are the gendered choices available for them to perform their self and identity as a woman. But the meaning-making of Burqa in their everyday life is rooted in the religious choices available to them. Beyond dress 'veiling' practices are more disciplined by the religious interpretations of the everyday. Again hybrid versions of performing the body through dress are embodied differently in terms of the Space, class, sectarian ideology, education and age. It also embodies Personal Comfort (individual agency) as the basis of the diverse choices available to them in its socio-spatial intersections.

Veiling the body

The veiling prevalent among Muslim women worldwide are more susceptible to being observed as 'the 'oppressed section of women' worldwide. The Assamese Muslim women offer a very different picture to the whole debate of 'veiling' the body within India. They do not follow the pan-Islamic conventions of veiling and consider themselves are more liberal. Though there is no purdha or hijab among these women, some follow the custom of 'covering their head' in public. The field suggests three categories of people who practice head covering differently. Firstly, some women haven't followed the headcover during childhood, but they have started using it for different reasons after marriage. Some women take the headcover only in the initial stage of their marriage. In the second category are the women who don't use any kind of head cover at all. In the third category, women like to wear hijab if they get a chance, but they have reasons for not using it.

Lived Religion; marriage and divorce

Religion emerged as the central criterion in the meaning-making of their understandings and marriage or divorce experiences. However, polygamy and talaq are more common among the lower-class Bengali or Hindi speaking linguistic communities. It also depends on the religious teachings of different sectarian ideologies or the specific Moulavi and 'his'

interpretations of religion. Access to modern or theological knowledge also provides differing experiences of marriage among the studied women.

Sectarian Ideologies

Their ideological thought guides these villages, and the thought determines the ideology that most people in the villages follow. The main ideologies that were seen in these villages are the Barelvi ideology and the Wahhabi ideology. These ideologies are important because men first follow these ideological thoughts in a particular village. These thoughts are brought to the household through men where women try to follow it. This process of learning and performing these ideologies in her everyday life facilitate constructing her 'self'. The village Barika Chuburi follows the Barelvi ideology, Saikia Chuburi Muslim village follows the Wahhabi ideology, the Moria Village, Beseria Muslim village follow the Barelvi ideology, and the Bhukhuwa Chapori follow the Wahhabi ideology.

Geographies of the Other

There is an active ghettoisation of 'immigrant' lower-class Muslim and their cultures to specific geographies. These geographies of 'othering' is more evident within the Muslim communities themselves. The Assamese speaking Muslim women claiming the Assamese identity often embody stigma against margins within the Muslims.

Linguistic Nationalism

This is further rooted in the historicity of these communities and the discourses intertwined with Assamese nationalisms. The immigrant 'Bengali' other is the larger product of the Assamese nationalist mobilisations in the late seventies and early 80ies. Thus the immigrant Muslim is an '**other**' in its local nationalism.

Politics of Othering

Again these othering become complex with the larger 'Religious other' within the Hindutva nationalist politics. For that all 'Muslims' froms a political other for the hegemonic nationalist discourse prevailing in the country. All Muslims are stigmatised and othered in their everyday life beyond their gender, class, caste, regional registries.

Therefore the study argues that the materiality of Being and becoming a Muslim woman is more about intersecting their religious and gendered identity with their multiple socio-spatial registries.

