

## **Abstract**

The social construction of Muslim women's identity in Assam has to be located in the larger debates on gender and Islam, and the local context of lived Islam. The study tries to explore the everyday lives of Muslim women in Assam, how they conceive their body and self and how they construct their identity and sexuality. How does their agency negotiate with the larger secular, pluralistic ethnic constitution of Assamese society vis-à-vis the normative religious doctrines of Islam? How does the overarching patriarchal structure within these domains practices it differently? This varied exposition to the so-called 'models' of patriarchy and gender relations can generate ambivalence in the construction of self and identity.

The sweeping generalisation of symbolic representation/s ('hijab' or veil) of Muslim women as expressions of repressive structures of patriarchy is problematic. At the same time, according religious sanctity and legitimising oppressive practices in the name of progressive Islamism is also problematic. Therefore, this study explores the construction of self and identity through the lived experiences of being a Muslim woman in Assam. To understand the lived experiences, it is important to understand the diverse social location of Muslim women in Assam. Linguistically these Muslim populations of Assam consist of the Assamese speaking Muslims, the Bengali speaking Muslims, and the Hindi speaking Muslims. Muslims in Assam is not a homogenous category; their identity varies in terms of language, region, sects, historical roots, etc.

### **Statement of the Problem**

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. It is also important to look at the individual subjectivity negotiate with these diverse factors and their implications on her 'self'. The debate on understanding the everyday life of Muslim women across the world is complex. 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. 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 Assamese speaking Muslim women do not carry the symbolic representations of pan Islamic identity. It is complicated to identify their religious identity through their physical appearance in public. It is easier to identify other linguistic categories of Muslims with their dress or veil in public. The everyday life of Muslim women is exposed to differing versions of tradition and modernity, both secular and sacred. The sacred religious space is a critical context for the formation of one's self and identity. The religious self may not go well in tandem with the public secular self; one is introduced through the institutions of modernity. Thus, ambivalence prevails in her construction of self and identity. Further it needs to be examined how patriarchy is reproduced and restructured through the everyday life. The Muslim family structure also invited larger public and academic debates. The women are often represented as 'victims' through the practices of polygamy and instant divorce or talaq. Similarly, Muslim men can have multiple partners simultaneously, whereas women are not.

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.

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. Linguistically these Muslim populations of Assam consist of the Assamese speaking Muslims, the Bengali speaking Muslims, and the Hindi speaking Muslims.

## Review of literature

Literatures from the classical works on history to the Islamic feminist discourses have been reviewed where Edward Gait work (1963) in his “A History of Assam,” provides an account of the pre-historic and traditional rulers. This book provides the account of the first Muslim invasion. *Kamrupa* or old Assam first came in contact with the Muslims in 1198 A.D., when a Turkish army led by Muhammad ibn Bakhtiyar Khilji conquered Bengal defeating Lakshman Sen (1169-1198), the last king of Sen Dynasty in Bengal. This reading of the history of Assam is challenged by Yasmin Saikia through her chapter, ‘The Muslims of Assam’ of the edited book, *Northeast India: A Place of Relation*, talks about the political history and the advent of Muslims in Assam is always looked through the stories of violence of wars between the armies of Assam against the Mughals. Fatima Mernissi in her polemic work *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society* introduced feminist interpretation everyday life of Muslim women from the Morocco. She outlined a new narrative on the history of gendered subalternity (Rhouni, 2010:43) through a secular critique. She presented voices of underprivileged women in rural and urban areas of Morocco and exploring the ways in which they were subject to both class and gender discrimination. The acclaimed Islamic feminist Amina Wadud through her *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women’s Reform in Islam* argued for re-reading historical Islam and challenged the androcentric interpretations of *Sharia* but firmly rooted in the Qur’anic tradition of Islam. They have raised debates challenging patriarchal readings of Qu’ran and Hadith (sayings of the Prophet).

The everyday life is studied from a social constructionist framework, where the work of symbolic interaction theorists and phenomenologist has been used as an entry point. Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckman, in “The Social Construction of Reality”, presents everyday life as a reality, which is interpreted by individual and is subjectively meaningful to them as a logical world. To understand the identity construction of a Muslim woman in her everyday life, her ‘me’ self and ‘I’ self should be considered. For G.H. Mead the process of interaction involves function of mind, social self and structure of society where mind itself is a process and not a thing. Bourdieu’s understanding of *Habitus* further refines this structure-agency debate. *Habitus* is the mental structures through which people deal with the social world. People are bestowed with internalising system through which they perceive, understand, appreciate and evaluate the real world. Bourdieu’s *Habitus* is the

outcome of the internalisation of structures and with this one tries to construct their identity.

‘The Body in Everyday life’ (1998) by Sarah Nettleton talks about how ordinary men and women perceive their body through the physical and emotional needs, illness, gender and ageing of the bodies. In the book, ‘The sociology of the body’, Kate Cregan points out that, Embodiment, is the physical and mental experience of existence, which is the condition of possibility for our relating to other people, and to the world. Meenakshi Thapan tried to explore the gender, class and embodiment in the everyday life of women in India. Alexander’s work on embodying gender analyses the sex-gender relationship. ‘The Lived Body’ by Simon J. Williams and Gillian Bendelow (1998), explores the dimensions of body in dealing with sociological theory. Shahnaz Khan in her paper *Muslim Women: Negotiations in the Third Space* talks about Bhabha’s theory of third space in Muslim women’s lives. Jana Nakhal also in his paper ‘Women as space and woman in space: Relocating our bodies and Rewriting Gender in Space’ says, “the capitalist patriarchal system we live under dictates our roles and relations in the in the place...” he also argues that women are subjugated within economic and social structures at home, in the street, and in cafes and suggest that both women and men living in developing countries that fulfil their needs.

## **Major Findings**

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 it’s 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, their space, and the language that invokes their Bangladeshi origin. Their intimate relations are plagued by marital disharmonies, polygamy, and multiple talaqs. 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.

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. 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.

**Keywords:** Social Construction, Self, Identity, Muslim Women, Islamic Feminism, Embodiment, Lived Religion