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THE PIETY MOVEMENT IN AN AMERICAN SUBURB: THE EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN
OF THE ISLAMIC CIRCLE OF NORTH AMERICA ON STATEN ISLAND

by

AISHA RAHEEL

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Middle Eastern Studies
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of
New York.

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Middle Eastern Studies
in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

Date

Mucahit Bilici

Thesis Advisor

Date

Simon Davis

Executive Officer

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

ABSTRACT

The Piety Movement in an American Suburb: The Experiences of Women of the Islamic Circle
of North America on Staten Island

By Aisha Raheel

Advisor: Professor Mucahit Bilici

The participation of women in fundamentalist movements has always posed a problem for feminist analysis because it disrupts the belief that all women see themselves as victims who share a common interest in ending this oppression. More broadly, portrayals of fundamentalists as people who are uniquely opposed to modern life are simplistic and dehumanizing. They are particularly problematic for Muslims because often, all Muslims whether they are fundamentalists or not, are portrayed as adhering to the same uncompromising, fanatical, and violent form of faith.

The Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA) was founded in 1971 to provide its members with supportive religious communities. Its primary aim was education: to educate its diverse membership about Islam so that they would adhere to correct Islamic values. Its female members, who often wear hijab and marginalized through practices of gender segregation, could be mistaken as icons of the oppressed Muslim woman. This paper profiles the lives of ordinary Pakistani women who are members of the ICNA chapter on Staten Island. They are not the assertive activists that are often associated with Islamist activism in the West. They are ordinary women whose adoption of Islamist piety intersects with the spiritual and practical needs of their everyday lives. Using the framework provided by Saba Mahmood in *Politics of Piety: the*

Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject, this study proposes that the binary of oppression and liberation that is used to understand women's lives is unhelpful not only because women not only don't see themselves as oppressed but sometimes don't see becoming free as a priority either. These women were raised in Pakistan, a patriarchal society whose social norms they unquestionably accepted. They were satisfied with their lives there yet reluctantly emigrated to the United States at the behest husbands and families. Once there, they needed to find new friends, and larger communities that also represented familiar cultural patterns. These practical needs were met by joining their local ICNA chapter, attending its religious gatherings, and adopting the mode of piety that they encountered.

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I. Introduction

Every Friday, my mother would get ready to go out. My father, who was usually busy with other things, would take notice:

“Where are you going?” he would ask.

“To *dars*,” my mother replies. My mother would gather her coat hurrying to leave the house.

“Again!” Baba would reply, “but didn’t they have *dars* yesterday? Who will make dinner? When will you be back?” Without a word, my mother would leave the house closing the door behind her. Every week, a scene like this took place almost every time my mother went to *dars*.

Dars are regularly held social gatherings where men or women get together to listen to recitations of the Qur’an and here its exegetical commentaries from the group leader. The *dars* my mother attends are sponsored by the local chapter of the Islamic Circle of North America (henceforth ICNA), of which she is a member. ICNA is the flagship organization of Sunni orthodoxy among American Muslims, especially those of South Asian background. It promotes an Islam that has a heavy emphasis on Sunni orthodoxy which often centers around correct ritual practice, and traditional gender roles for women. Proponents of Islamic orthodoxy do not have the behavior of my mother in mind when they speak of Islamic conceptions of marriage and family life. Neither do proponents of secularism who often see fundamentalist women as brainwashed and subjugated. In this thesis I explore the lives of ICNA women on Staten Island. Why do they join the ICNA chapter? What role do their religious knowledge and practices play

in their everyday lives? Does religion bring a sense of self-actualization and agency in these women's lives, or does it lead to them being secluded at home as wives and mothers?

II. Significance of Research

Muslim women are often portrayed as passive, silent, and brainwashed. Such depictions can range from the condescending to the sinister. When Donald Trump wrongly suggested that Ghazala Khan, mother of slain U.S. Captain Humayun Khan, was not allowed to speak at the Democratic Convention while standing beside her husband: he was making an accusation that invoked the image of the meek Muslim woman.¹ Around the same time, a documentary was aired in the UK titled *Undercover Mosque: The Return*, in which a journalist secretly filmed women in Salafi study groups in London, exposing the hardline Saudi Islam that was being promoted.² Although the documentary stressed that the group rejected terrorism, it nonetheless implied that Salafi teachings inspired terrorism, and encouraged Muslims to segregate themselves from the rest of British society. The Muslim woman manages to be both meek and submissive as well as violent and intolerant at the same time.

It is not entirely wrong to associate Islamic modest dress with separation. Globally and historically, women and family life were relegated to the private sphere. By not discussing their marital lives in public, revealing the names of the women of their families, and keeping hidden their life stories and achievements, Muslims believed they were preserving the modesty of women. In doing so, they also silenced the contributions to society made by female scholars,

¹ Anne Geran, "Trump Stirs Outrage after He Lashes Out at the Muslim Parents of a Dead U.S. Soldier" *Washington Post*, July 30 2016.

² Anabel Inge, *The Making of a Salafi Muslim Woman* (Oxford University, 2017), 4

poets, and ordinary women. This leads to a cultural reticence of people to discuss their personal stories with people whom they know will want to share them. Exploring this complex reality is important for a proper understanding of the variety of Muslim experience in the American context.

I conducted my research as an insider. I attended *dars for young women regularly*. My mother is an active member of ICNA who attends dars regularly. I got suggestions for interview subjects, and contact information from my parents. They knew everyone that I interviewed. I interviewed nine subjects: six women and three men. They included seven immigrants from Pakistan, one from India, and an American-born woman who nonetheless was part of the same generation. All subjects are solidly middle class. My thesis will center around the five immigrant women as providing the main stories. The stories of the other four participants playing a supporting role by adding further context. All six women had university degrees, were married, and had children. Two of the women were housewives while four had paid employment. Those with paid employment include a doctor, a school administrator, and two paraprofessionals. By contrast, all of their husbands have paid employment as white collar professionals. Their spouses include doctors, accountants, and IT professionals.

There were limits to my intimacy with my subjects. Phone interviews, although more convenient for the interviewee, create more space between the researcher and the subject. At the same time, the questions I asked were personal ones relating to their emigration to the United States, personal religious practices, and how those practices affected relationships with their families. For all that, people spoke with a surprising amount of candor about their religious journeys. In the Pakistani community, privacy is of paramount importance, and personal subjects particularly related to family life are often difficult to discuss. The names of all interviewees

have been changed in order to protect their privacy. The distance between researcher and subject may have made this easier. A second layer of distance was generational. Although I was born in Pakistan like most of my subjects, I was raised in the United States. I was also born in 1994, making me a part of the millennial generation. I have grown up with a different set of social realities which many older Pakistanis are aware of but find hard to understand. My sample is small and homogenous. These are not the perspectives of the activists and speakers who give the speeches at conferences. They are not leaders of the national organizations. These are the voices of ordinary men and women. Voices of women are particularly important. They tend to be more active in religious life than men, but they are also less visible. For example, gender segregation is a perennial feature of any Muslim religious gathering. Segregation can create comfortable all female spaces for women to relax in but more broadly, it also means that there are no visible women leaders. Yet they are more diligent in attending dars than men are, teach in weekend and Islamic day schools, and are active in organizing community activities like Ramadan iftars and fundraising dinners. Women play a crucial, if invisible, role in Muslim community life.

III. Literature Review

Since often all Muslims are depicted as adhering to the same radical, uncompromising form of religion, it is presumed that all Muslims are fundamentalists. Therefore, all Muslims are affected by negative depictions of fundamentalism even if they are not fundamentalist or even pious believers. As a consequence, the popular and academic literature that is produced to challenge negative and simplistic portrayals is vast. The landscape becomes even more complicated when it comes to the Muslim women.

Stereotypes of women were not the main theme of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), he discusses them at some length when analyzing the depiction of the odalisque in the novels of Gustave Flaubert. Others who have discussed the depiction of Muslim women in more detail include Jansen (1996), and Alloula (1986). If anyone represents the stereotype of the oppressed Muslim woman, it is fundamentalist Muslim women with their penchant for covering their hair and faces, and preference for traditional family roles. Yet stereotypes of Muslim women as submissive and powerless affect all women of Muslim heritage, not only those who become fundamentalists. Not surprisingly, there is a substantial literature on Islamist and conservative Muslim women that challenges these stereotypes (Mahmood 2012, Ahmed 2010, Ahmed 2007).

A canonical study of the Muslim women involved in fundamentalism is *Politics of Piety* by anthropologist Saba Mahmood (2011). Mahmood stresses that the women of Egypt's mosque movement were not involved as activists in the Muslim Brotherhood though the Da'wah of Zainab al-Ghazali was influential as a precursor to the mosque movement [explain what is Da'wah]. Her study is valuable for the theory of agency that Mahmood used to explain the women's choices. Drawing on the work of Judith Butler and Michel Foucault, she suggests that the way people inhabit the norms may oppress the subject, but it also forms the subject.³ The social norms that a subject inhabits are the necessary ground through which the subject encounters her agency. Mahmood questions whether all human beings have a natural desire for freedom and choice if only they were not blocked by relations of power that are external. Presumably, if the power dynamics within families, larger communities, and in larger society were eliminated, human beings would have the full autonomy that they supposedly naturally wanted. Going further, Mahmood rejects the binary between oppressed and oppressor. Not every

³ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 20.

act can be understood as fitting into a binary where the oppressed is always resisting oppression. This framework has the advantage of capturing the voices of women who may stress the importance of spiritual obligation as a reason for their participation in halaqas, or wearing of hijab. It also takes into account the reality that many women do not grow up in a context where progressive values, or female participation in public activities are a social norm. Such realities may render the piety movement as promoted in ICNA's neighborhood study circles more normal. Mahmood's theories of agency and the self can be applied to a variety of contexts.

Study of American Islam as a field is relatively new (Bilici 2012: 19). Yet several histories of Islam in America, or specific ethnic communities do exist. All such studies typically mention the Islamist roots of the major Islamic organizations (Ghanea-Basiri, Ahmed 2011, Mohammad-Arif, 2002). Amina Mohammad-Arif's work on South Asian Muslims in New York City provides a detailed evolution of ICNA from a branch of the *Jamat-e-Islami* to an independent American organization. As with Muslim communities elsewhere in the world, there are many studies dealing with the agency of Muslim women. These include Ahmed (2011), Karim (2009), and Moxley-Rouse (2004). There is also a body of literature that discusses conversion to Islam by Western women, (Anway 1993, Van Neuwkerk 2003). Leila Ahmed's study, *A Quiet Revolution*, charts how the activist streak of Islamists movements inspired women to become activists for justice and civil rights for their communities. Her study profiles several, assertive public personalities like Ingrid Mattson and Asra Nomani. In contrast, the women profiled here are ordinary people who live normal lives. Paradoxically both their very normality coupled with their visible difference obscures their stories from view. They are not silent and oppressed as portrayed by the media, but they also are not the assertive agents that one associates with Islamist activism in the West. Their stories highlight engagements with Islamist

piety in everyday life as well as the role that pre-existing cultural logics and anxieties played in making the adoption of Islamist piety a possibility. Activists play an important and visible role in community life. However, it is just as important to emphasize that the promotion of Islamist piety was also a process that happened from below, something that people also chose to participate in. Her description of intra-Muslim politics could be a follow up to the description of ICNA in Mohammad Arif's study of South Asian Muslims in New York.

IV. Emigration and Transition

The subjects interviewed for this research came to the United States roughly between 1984 and 1994. As previously mentioned, all interviewees were educated, and had white-collar jobs or were married to men with white collar professions. All were able to achieve a middle-class life within a short period of time. Only three men were interviewed yet they spoke more about economic incentives and better quality of life as a reason for leaving Pakistan than women did. In the words of one of my informants:

At that time none of my friends went back. Everybody wanted to stay here. The main objective was to stay here. There were more opportunities here compared to back home. Because at that time in Pakistan in my computer science field, there was not much. There were opportunities but not that much.⁴

A second informant recalled that,

There was a lottery system to select people, and I was selected in that. The conditions in Karachi were getting worse and worse. I was unable to really survive in Karachi. So, we

⁴ Informant 1, Interview by Author, July 16 2019

decided, let's take this opportunity and move to America. There were political disturbances. There was extortion of money, fear of our lives if we didn't pay them.⁵

In their reasons, both men were typical of the larger South Asian community. Most immigrants from the Indian subcontinent (Pakistan, India, or Bangladesh) were educated, urban professionals looking for better economic opportunities or a better quality of life.⁶ A second reason was also cited by one of the interviewees: political instability in Karachi, an important urban center in Pakistan. In the 1990s, Karachi was torn apart by violence between Muhajir and Sindi political factions as Sindis tried to reduce Muhajir political hegemony in the city. The resulting violence contributed to the decisions of many Urdu speakers to emigrate to North America or the Gulf states.

The interviewees were representative of larger South Asian migration patterns in a second way. Women typically followed their husbands to the United States. South Asian men were usually married with young families, or single. Once settled, men would find a wife in their homeland, or bring over their families if they were already married. The reverse: immigration at the instigation of a wife who then sponsored her husband was uncommon. As a consequence, the reasons cited above did not loom large in the narratives of most female migrants. In general, the reasons women left Pakistan could be summarized in one word: marriage. Afiya's story is typical, "I got married and my husband was here. He was studying computer science. So I came here."⁷ Shahana, who emigrated to the United States in 1994 and today works as a teaching assistant, expressed no desire to leave Pakistan: "I came here when I got married, and I came

⁵ Informant 2, Interview by Author, September 28 2019

⁶ Aminah Mohammad-Arif, *Salaam America: South Asians in New York*, (Anthem Press 2002), 36-38

⁷ Afiya, Interview by author, July 12, 2019

here because my husband was here. I never ever thought of moving to another country because I was happy in Pakistan.”⁸

”I don’t know what it is with other people that they want to come to America.“, says Shazia, another Pakistani who emigrated around the same time, “I don’t care. It made no difference to me because my husband was here. He was here. Fine.” In contrast to other women, Tabassum describes the following situation:⁹

We just stayed because some medical needs were there. I could get better treatment in this country. But once we settled down, and my husband realized that it was not as bad as what he was thinking, it worked out very well.

Tabassum cited health care needs as her reason for leaving Pakistan. In her account, it is not easy to tell who made the decision to emigrate though she does indicate that this move was necessary if undesirable. She makes clear that her husband did not want to leave. She also displays her own ambivalence about leaving, “We didn’t come here to earn money. We didn’t come here to do something.” Although Tabassum chooses to downplay her own agency in persuading her husband to emigrate, she still indicates that leaving seemed necessary. Whatever the family’s medical needs were, they were severe enough that her reluctant husband could be persuaded to emigrate. Subsequently, her husband needed to be encouraged to keep trying, to believe that the family’s economic situation would improve. She was not a passive actor.

In their stories of migration, the women may appear passive actors with no voice. Yet there was some variation. Some opposed it, some were indifferent, and some played an active

⁸ Shahana, Interview by author, January 16, 2020.

⁹ Tabassum, Interview by Author, January 26, 2020

role in persuading their spouse that they should emigrate. They didn't leave because they opposed their government for political reasons, and that they were satisfied with life in Pakistan. Women didn't always have a choice about whether to leave or not but had to follow their husbands in most cases.

All the immigrants interviewed eventually moved to Staten Island. Staten Island is New York's whitest and most conservative borough. As recently as 2010, the borough had a 67% white majority, and voted for Trump in the 2016 presidential election. Yet the borough has equally been shaped by New York's long immigration history from early Dutch colonial settlers to the nineteenth century emigration of Irish and Italian Catholics.¹⁰ In the 1970s, many white New Yorkers moved to Staten Island from Brooklyn to avoid increasing rents and racial conflict. Although Staten Island is the least diverse borough, it is slowly being transformed by the post-1965 immigration wave from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Eastern Europe. As Pakistani immigrants became more prosperous, they would move out of traditional areas of urban settlement in Queens or Brooklyn following the same path tread by the previous generation of Italian Americans. Staten Island is exactly the sort of area that many middle-class professional immigrants aspire to live in. It is a borough of residential suburbs where middle class couples can afford to buy a home, and send their children to a good school. Its proximity to Brooklyn and New Jersey allows people to live close to their workplaces, or to the ethnic stores and restaurants that enable immigrants to maintain ethnic authenticity while living in white suburban neighborhoods. Although Staten Island's Muslim community is small, it is vibrant. There are

¹⁰ Flannigan R., Kramer D. *Staten Island: Conservative Bastion in a Liberal City*, (University of America Press, 2012), 13

eight mosques on the island.¹¹ The mosques are divided along ethnic lines including Albanian, Pakistani, West African, and Arab masjids. With the growth of the Muslim community has come the establishment of chapters of national Muslim organizations notably the Muslim American Society (MAS), and Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA).¹²

On the face of it, Pakistani migrants integrated into American life very quickly. They seem to be establishing themselves in Staten Island, and attaining a middle-class lifestyle. But finding friends, a social life and a world that was familiar proved to be challenging. Although they now had nice homes in nice neighborhoods, Pakistani women lived far away from their fellow immigrants. The lives that women were used to in Pakistan changed drastically. They found themselves separated from their extended families back home but without the comfort and familiarity that ethnic ghettos traditionally provide. Afiya, who was the only informant to move directly to Staten Island (as opposed to passing through Brooklyn, Queens, or some other part of the country altogether), observed the sense of isolation:

People were friendly but it was a big cultural difference as compared to Pakistan. This was my first time to come to a Western country. I was missing my own friends and family back home. The language was like, I learned English. But you know spoken language was a little difficult for me to understand and people around me they had, it was a difference compared to Pakistan as far as their clothing and so many other things.¹³

¹¹ Lori Weintrob and Cyril Gosh, “Whose Dreams? Debates on Immigration in the Museum, Mosque, and Classroom“ in *Beyond Bystanders*, (Brilsense, 2017), 117-129.

¹² The Islamic Circle of North America was founded in the United States in 1971 to promote a strong religious among American Muslims. Although most of the membership is South Asian, it promotes a strong emphasis on outreach to non-Muslims. The Muslim American Society (MAS), was founded in 1992 to promote a stronger religious identity in Arab communities.

¹³ Afiya, Interview by author, July 12, 2019.

Shahana, who had previously expressed that she hadn't wanted to emigrate provided a moving testimony of her struggles:

The first ten years were very difficult for me because I was not used to it. I didn't do any kind of job before. I was born and grew up in a well-established family. My father owned a big business. We had a good lifestyle back home. So, I never thought of going to another country to settle down just for a better standard of living because I would say that before coming here that we were having good enough living standards back home.

But when I came here, it was very difficult for me because I felt like I'm not getting the same lifestyle that I grew up with. And then I was not used to going out by myself. I was very shy. I was always dependent on my family like on my father, my brothers. So, when I came here, I had to do a lot of things on my own because my husband was working. I was pregnant also when I came here. I still remember that it was very hard for me... those ten years. My personality is that I'm always very positive. I felt when I came here I was feeling very lonely. At the same time, I was thinking that I am blessed now.¹⁴

From the stories of transition told above, two things can be concluded. Reasons for emigrating were economic or materialistic in nature when it was a free choice. However, it was almost always men who made the decision to leave. From the standpoint of most female interviewees, emigration was not a freely made decision so that women typically cited their husbands as a reason for leaving. They did not come to the United States with a desire to reinvent themselves. The pressure to assimilate into a white, Protestant mainstream was not there because in the post-Civil Rights era the United States came to view itself as a multicultural nation. However, moving to a new country was not easy. In the United States, immigrants who practiced a religion that was different from the American mainstream had to organize their own formal religious institutions and informal spaces. What this looked like, depended a lot on what

¹⁴ Shahana, Interview by author, January 16, 2020.

religious practice looked like in the country of origin as well as the demands placed on people by the conditions in their new country.

Most Muslim immigrants were not Islamists. But the national organizations that were founded to represent the Muslim community were all founded by immigrants who had been involved in Islamist movements in their home countries. What mattered most to people who migrated for economic reasons was finding a community of others like themselves and finding religious and ethnic spaces that resembled cultural traditions from their homeland. Immigrants needed to develop a sense of community, and needed also to find a way to continue their own religious and cultural traditions. They could potentially have been drawn in any direction as long as the people leading them could present themselves as knowledgeable, and that the religion being taught was something culturally familiar.

V. ICNA: A Brief History

When people think of the Islamic Circle of North America today, they are likely to think of Islamic Relief, which is part of its social service division and active in aid efforts domestically and abroad. People who are raised in families that were active in mainstream Muslim communities might also think of the annual ICNA conference that brings together the activists, intellectuals, and religious leaders of the community. But these things were not the original aim of ICNA. Originally, its aim had been education: to educate people about correct religious practice. It is the local chapters and neighborhood study circles, which are founded by ordinary people that are involved in their local communities, that is at the heart of this work.

ICNA has its roots in the activism of Islamist students and activists who came to the United States in the early 1960's.¹⁵ In these years, they came, as many others did, to take advantage of greater educational opportunities. But as political activists with histories of involvement in the *Muslim Brotherhood* in Arab countries or the *Jamaat-e-Islami* in South Asia, they were persecuted by the various secular regimes that governed their homelands. In the United States, Islamist student activists founded student associations, and organized religious activities for Muslims at their various university campuses. They took notice of each other's work, and realized that they could be more effective if they formed a national organization. For Islamist students, founding the MSA was an opportunity to bring together students of diverse cultural backgrounds to attempt to put into practice the utopian ideals of Islam as an ideology and program of action.

Activists split from the MSA to form groups that focused on other aspects of community life beyond the needs of students at university campuses. A group of South Asian students split from the MSA in 1971 to found the Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA) based in Jamaica, Queens.¹⁶ These students had been members of the *Jamaat-e-Islami* in India and Pakistan. Abu ala Mawdudi (1904-1979), the founder of the *Jamaat* approached Islam as if it was a political action plan. For Mawdudi, Islam was a revolutionary ideology, and a political system. If it was practiced correctly and sincerely, then it would lead to a just and perfect society. Mawdudi's

¹⁵ Kambiz Ghanea-Basiri, *A History of Islam in America*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 229

¹⁶ Aminah Arif-Mohammad, *Salaam America*, 172

Islamism was also built on fear: namely the fear of Western influence particularly on changes in Muslim family life.¹⁷ Asked what had set him on his Islamist path, Maududi once replied,

I saw Muslim shurafa (honorable) women walking the streets without *pardah* [veil], an unthinkable proposition only a few years ago. This change shocked me so greatly that I could not sleep at night, wondering what had brought this sudden change among Muslims.¹⁸

VI. Islamism vs. the Islam of Immigrants

The majority of immigrants to the United States were not Islamists. They did not see Islam as an all-encompassing way of life that needed to be promoted through activism. They understood it as a matter of personal practice and ethical resources. Leila Ahmed observes that there were sometimes conflicts over religion when children returned home from Sunday school or summer camp, and informed their parents that the Islam they were practicing was “wrong”.¹⁹ Nonetheless, there are points of agreement between Islamist activists and ordinary Muslims that enable immigrants to accept the Islamist ideal.

One of these is the emphasis on modesty for women. The promotion of hijab is foundational to the promotion of Islam as ideology. Women are sexual beings who tempt men. They must dress modestly in order to restrain male sexual aggression. Hijab honors the woman as opposed to the alternative offered by Western permissive society which commodifies women as sex objects. There is a heavy emphasis on the use of hadith literature and Qur’anic texts to

¹⁷ Lamia R. Shehadeh, *The Idea of Women in Fundamentalist Islam*. (United States: University of Florida Press 2003), 30

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 30

¹⁹ Leila Ahmed, *A Quiet Revolution: The Veil’s Resurgence from the Middle East to America*. (New Haven: Harvard University Press 2010), 162

explain Islamic views on a given issue. This has the effect of making an injunction both prescriptive, something that is sanctioned by divine decree. It is instructive to quote the views of Sheikha Tamara Gray, a traditionalist scholar trained in Syria, are instructive:

The argument that it is not fard (obligatory), is an interesting dismissal of the witnessing of women. The women of the Prophet Salallahu Walahi Wasalam, by that I mean the women who were first there who heard these verses first. Their response when they heard the verse was a tearing of fabric that they had embroidered and stitched. Now if you embroider and stitch fabric, you value it. They took this valuable fabric, and tore it and put it upon themselves. What does this tell us? It tells us that they heard, they understood, they responded. It tells us that Allah (SWT), our law, our Sharia, is based on looking at the personal responses of women to the Qur'an.²⁰

Explained this way, how can a Muslim woman who cares about her religion not wish to cover her hair? The sheikha is invoking the idealization of the early Muslim community during the Prophet's time as the best generation, the people Muslims should want to emulate if they wish to be closer to their Creator. People who want to be close to God need to have faith, to obey religious commandments without question. This reasoning also goes beyond the gendered assumptions that are usually used to explain why Islam requires women to veil.

Most Pakistani women are not familiar with the Qur'anic verses or hadiths that prove that veiling is a religious obligation. But the gendered assumptions behind modesty are all too familiar. The women started going to college in the 1990s, by which the Islamization of public life that started Zia al-Haq's dictatorship was well under way. Hitherto, women in urban areas were more mobile. They could dress in modern Western clothes without being stigmatized.²¹ At

²⁰ "The Hijab with Anse Tamara Gray," (April 13 2015), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uwMYPD75Raw&t=127s>

²¹ Sadaf Ahmad, *Transforming Faith: The Story of al-Huda and Islamic Revivalism Among Urban Pakistani Women*, (Syracuse University Press 2007), 138.

the same time, it was still a *purdah* [veil] society. *Purdah* took two forms.²² There were different styles of modest dress like the burqa. There are also separate spaces set aside for women such as separate train compartments, curtained off sections of lecture halls, and separate schools and colleges that are totally staffed by women.

The need to separate girls from boys as much as possible often discouraged women from participating in the labor force but could also create opportunities for girls from conservative families to pursue careers. They could become teachers and doctors catering to the needs of female patients or students thus minimizing contact with men. *Purdah* enabled parents and elders within families to maximize their influence over their daughter's future marriage prospects by limiting opportunities for women to socialize with unrelated men.

Purdah restrictions were a normative part of life in Pakistan for almost all female subjects.²³ All of them had mothers who dressed in the chador, and who stayed at home to raise large families. But they themselves were able to attend high school, and university. They did so in all female environments, and some described wearing the chador when they went out in public. It could bring certain kinds of freedom with it as Afiya describes:

It was like not very big. It was a cotton like lawn type dupatta. We just used to put it on our heads when we used to leave the house, and then it was just a girl's school so not in the school. At the same time, when we leave the school coming to house, we used to put on our heads like the basic thing was at that time to cover head, not show your hair. The same thing was when I went to college, college was also a private girl's college so there were no boys. The same thing, we used to cover when we used to leave the house, and we used to fold our chador and used to keep it with us all day but not keep covering all day in college. And same was like when we used to leave college coming home, we used to

²² Hanna Papanek, "Purdah in Pakistan: Seclusion and Modern Occupations for Women" in *Separate Worlds: Studies of Purdah in South Asia*, edited by Gail Minault and Hanna Papanek (Delhi: South Asia Books, 1982)

²³ Hanna Papanek, "Purdah in Pakistan..."

cover. And same thing was when I went to the university. I used to do the same thing. I used to cover with a dupatta or something. It was always part sometimes you're careless. That was the matter. Otherwise, it was always with me from my childhood. But at the same time, I learned how to drive a car. My dad taught me even though as I told you, it was not a very modern city it was an industrial city, and there were some restrictions. But still, my dad wanted me to learn everything, so I also learned how to ride a motorcycle.²⁴

Afiya was able to attend college, and learn to ride a motorcycle. Although she acknowledges that the conservatism of the town she grew up in placed restrictions on her mobility, Afiya did not describe her upbringing in terms of freedom, oppression or restrictions but rather as a normal part of life. It did affect a Pakistani girl's sense of what women were supposed to be. Comparing herself to her Americanized daughter, Shahana reflected that "I remember we were never allowed to go out without my brothers or my dad, my family. But here, the girls go out whenever you want to. You are like a little independent. So, we were not like that."²⁵

In the understanding of these women, good girls dressed modestly, avoided unrelated men as much as possible, and needed to be accompanied by fathers or brothers when going somewhere so that their sense of safety and modesty would be preserved. In short, girls were supposed to be modest but dependent on men and family. Neither of these women saw their upbringing as restrictive. Both described happy childhoods, and positive relationships with their families. Conversely, girls who did not dress modestly were not good girls.

The assumptions behind purdah were so pervasive that they also effected women who didn't observe purdah restrictions. Tabassum was one of many women in her generation who had

²⁴ Afiya, Interview by author, July 28, 2019.

²⁵ Shahana, Interview by author, January 16, 2020.

not grown up wearing a veil. From a middle-class family in Karachi, Tabassum had been educated in co-ed environments from elementary school to university.²⁶ She studied medicine and dressed in fashionable clothes without covering her hair. Tabassum explains her lifestyle in the context of her family's emphasis on education: "As far as education was concerned, my parents didn't restrict me from anything. But I couldn't go for parties and things like that. So long story short, we were moderate. We were not wearing burqas, and hijabs and things like that."

In her own understanding, Tabassum dressed modestly, and did not see the family as very liberal or modern. Her views of women who dressed immodestly are not different from the views of her peers who dressed more conservatively:

The society was not open at that time at all even though there were very modern people. The most dresses they can wear is like sleeveless dresses, or tight dresses which fit well on your body. That kind of dressing was like more vulgarity showed up, or more body parts showed up.

Here, Tabassum is associating immodest dress with vulgarity. Practices of wearing modest dress affected women's subjectivity. They did not see the way they grew up as being restrictive but the proper social norm for good girls. It is noteworthy that Tabassum, whose upbringing was the least restrictive of the three women profiled here, agrees that it is wrong for women to dress immodestly. If middle class women in Pakistan only discarded veils to assert a middle-class status, or follow the fashions of the day, then how deeply did ideas about gender equality or individual freedom really affect people from this milieu? While the idea of wearing hijab would prove to be new and difficult for some women to adopt, the idea that it was

²⁶ Tabassum, Interview by author, January 26, 2020

necessary for a woman to behave modestly, and protect herself from male sexual aggression was not new.

VII. Joining a *Dars*: Finding Community

In Pakistan, women are traditionally discouraged from attending mosques. Attendance at Jumu'ah prayers is not mandatory for women. In a culture where women were discouraged from taking part in public life, excluding women from mosques made sense. Mosques became male only spaces. It was important for everyone, men and women alike, to learn to he read the Qur'an in Arabic, and to perform basic rituals. It was unnecessary and uncommon for women to pursue further religious knowledge. *Dars* were a marginal practice confined to members of the *Jamaat-e-Islami* for whom religious education is a top priority.²⁷ Attending *dars* was a new experience for some women.

In the United States, Shahana describes adjusting to a world in which she had to do things on her own. As an introvert, she describes the social aspect of *dars*:

We were living in an apartment building. In the beginning, I didn't know that there was a masjid in the basement of that building. So, once I found out, I was very happy. Gradually, I found out that there was a family there. Then I found out that the ladies, the Muslim ladies from our building- they were doing things like *dars*. When I found out, I was very happy because I wanted to go there. I wanted to join them. Once I started going to her house, her apartment I felt myself that now I'm like more comfortable.²⁸

²⁷ Ahmad Sadaf, *Transforming Faith*, 6

²⁸ Shahana, Interview by author, January 16, 2020 (Min 20:54).

Tabassum had come from a modern family. She had no interest in going to *dars* in Pakistan. In the United States, she expressed fears that becoming a member of ICNA might jeopardize her immigration status:

I was in a doctor's appointment for one of my kids. I found a woman there. We started talking about we are Pakistani. We are Pakistani from New York too. I was living in Staten Island. I didn't know anybody. It was OK but I don't have anybody to talk to. So, she said, "Oh, do you know we have Qur'an classes every Friday. Through ICNA organization where we move, and we listen and learn things. I said, "O really but nobody's inviting me." No, it's not per invitation. It's open to everybody. Then she gave me he address.

I started coming to their classes. Classes is like you are talking about a topic, sometimes a general topic. Sometimes they are talking about the community. Sometimes they take a chapter from the Qur'an like one surah, they pick it. Hey, al-Husain did that. That was my beginning starting this class. But I didn't join ICNA. I never give a thought to be a member. But then I was asked by the women over there that you want to do some volunteer time for the organization. I was really scared. I said what? I'm not going to fill out any form and sign it. So, I got a little scared. I said no, I'm not signing it. If you're involved with somebody, the American government not going to like it. My citizenship was in process. I was in a dilemma that probably it's going to affect negatively. But they explain to me, it's not just a religious organization which is helping everybody. Then I signed the form, and became a member.

The presence of ICNA was not about the organization per se but about seeking religious knowledge, and the company of other Pakistani women. The *dars* took place in the homes of members of ICNA. It was led by an Indian immigrant woman, a doctor by profession, who had lived with her husband in Saudi Arabia for several years before they emigrated to the United States. Although not a trained scholar, the teacher had been part of study circles in Saudi Arabia and was perceived to be knowledgeable about religion.

It is important to point out how innocuous ICNA's activities were in women's narratives. By contrast, there were allegations that Islamist activists in Muslim majority countries were

engaging in coercive tactics or were promoting sectarian political agendas.²⁹ In Egypt, Anwar Sadat allowed the Muslim Brotherhood to operate freely allowing them to infuse the public culture with religion. Female Islamist activists who had promoted hijab as obligatory were allegedly paid by Saudi sources. In Pakistan, promotion of Islamic revival was more directly tied to political agendas because it was directly supported by the military regime of Zia al-Haq (1977-1989). Under the guise of Islamization, Zia's regime promoted policies that were harmful to women like the Hudood Ordinances under which women could be stoned for sex outside of marriage if they failed to produce four male witnesses. The regime also used the educational system and television to promote the belief that Pakistan was not united by a common ethnicity or culture by a shared religion which was really monolithic Sunni identity. In that context, the pious Muslim woman was someone who stayed at home to raise children and observed veiling in public.³⁰ By contrast, Pakistani women learned from their fellow immigrants, who became their friends, that *dars* were taking place. It also fulfilled the needs of members of the community to socialize with other people. They could also take their children with them thus providing practical help to parents in passing on their religious values.

Similarly, Mohammad-Arif observes that the Jamaat-e-Islami in Pakistan is seen as fundamentalist but that ICNA is viewed more positively by ordinary immigrants who don't share its Islamist orientation. The Barelvis, who oppose the Jamaat in Pakistan and the United Kingdom, saw ICNA as "a good organization," in the words of one New York Barelvi leader.³¹

²⁹ Leila Ahmed, *A Quiet Revolution*, 87

³⁰ Sadaf Ahmad, *Transforming Faith: The Story of al-Huda and Islamic Revivalism among Urban Pakistani Women*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2009), 38

³¹ The Barelvi is a Sufi movement that originated in the Indian subcontinent. Barelvis are known for promoting popular Muslim practices such as the veneration of saints and celebrating the Prophet's birthday. For members of the Jamaat-e-Islami, these practices are un-Islamic innovations that smack of idolatry. In areas where the two groups

The late Maulana Naseem, a former ICNA leader, was often invited by members of the community to solve marital disputes and teach their children.³²

Religious faith was also an important motivating factor. For women who were already deeply religious, it was important to further one's religious knowledge. Afiya had grown up in a religious family where her mother had some knowledge of hadith and Qur'anic text. In Pakistan, she had had a teacher who had given her lessons in *Tajweed* [Qur'anic recitation]. She expressed a wish to seek further knowledge:

I always had a thirst to continue that. Once I told a person that I just learned a few *juz* with translation, she said, you should continue. Since then I started thinking of getting a teacher to continue my education my Qur'anic education with translation.³³

For Tabassum who had come from a less religious background, *dars* proved to be revelatory:

I learned the importance of things in our religion which were never stressed. I never read the Qur'an with meaning. I hardly read it one or two times with translation. So during the classes, we are learning what Allah is saying to us. What he's talking about. What the Prophet is teaching us. Then it makes me, pushed me that you know what. You are a Muslim, and you are not doing these things. This is asked by Allah not by any human being. It's something which you can benefit from. It's something which you really need to do. So, if I'm not going to do it, I'm going to lose my religion. I'm going to lose my kids. My kids are not gonna follow anything. They're not gonna believe at all.³⁴

Here, the emphasis on understanding the Qur'an with meaning is presented as the authentic, correct way of being religious which Tabassum had never learned before. She also points out that the stakes for not knowing about religion are high in the American context, that

exist in large numbers like Pakistan and the UK, the Barelvis have involved themselves in sometimes violent conflict with their rivals.

³² Aminah Arif-Mohammad, *Salaam America*, 180

³³ Afiya, interview by author, July 9 2019

³⁴ Tabassum, interview by author, January 26 2020

she could lose her children to the wider culture. How could Tabassum raise her children to be good Muslims, if she didn't practice Islam correctly herself? The same fears were expressed by several other subjects. Ironically, Tabassum's fear that her children might lose their religious identity are analogous to fears of other Muslims around the world who participate in similar movements. In her ethnographic account of the al-Huda Movement in Pakistan which promotes a similar form of piety, Sadaf Ahmad discovered that many women participated in Al-Huda's *dars* because they feared increasing Westernization of Pakistani society.³⁵ They believed that Muslims must defend themselves from the Western onslaught through increased piety. *Dars* were where women learned about correct belief, and correct orthodox practice including the importance of family life, and of dressing modestly.

VIII. The Evolution of Obedience in Neotraditionalist Thought

ICNA sees itself as the standard bearer of Sunni orthodox practice among American Muslims. Like Islamists everywhere, they promote an idealized conception of patriarchal family life. This ideal family is promoted through Islamic literature, on blogs, and by popular celebrity imams and scholars. The Islamic family ideal is a patriarchal one where men work to support the family, and women's primary role is as wives and mothers.

The most important aspects of this ideal are the ways in which it departs from the precolonial legal tradition. Medieval scholars conceived of marriage as a form of ownership. Marriage meant that when a man paid *mahr* (dowry) to his wife, he had purchased exclusive

³⁵ Sadaf Ahmad, *Transforming Faith*, 133

access to her sexual and reproductive labor.³⁶ The wife's only duties were to provide sexual access and obey her husband, in exchange for financial maintenance from her husband. Scholars saw a man's sexual libido as uncontrollable, and saw satisfying it as urgent so much so that scholars argued that husbands had no right to force their wives to cook or clean but could prevent their wives from doing extra fasts or prayers if it interfered with his sexual rights. Medieval scholars took for granted that a divinely ordained social hierarchy existed in society where free people were superior to slaves, Muslims superior to non-Muslims, and men superior to women. As a result, medieval scholars did not center the concerns of women at the heart of their legal theorizing though at the same time, they were able to deliver rulings that favored women in individual cases. In order to command religious authority in Muslim communities, neotraditionalist scholars must situate their views within the classical scholarly tradition. This means that they must uphold a patriarchal cosmology while reconciling it with the egalitarian ideals of the liberal societies where they actually live. But Pakistani immigrant women, who were raised in a patriarchal society where gender differences are taken for granted, neotraditionalist ideals make sense.

Neotraditionalist views of marriage are predicated by the idealization of the companionate marriage.³⁷ Men and women have different roles that they are naturally suited for. Both roles are equally important. Marriage is supposed to be a relationship of love and mercy where the needs of both spouses are fulfilled. The lens of companionate marriage has blunted, to some degree, the harshest misogyny of some hadiths while leaving male leadership in place.

This can be seen in the evolution of understandings of what it means to be an obedient

³⁶ Kecia Ali, *Marriage and Slavery in Early Islam* (Harvard University Press, 2010), 73, 76

³⁷ Ayesha Chaudhry, *Domestic Violence and the Islamic Tradition* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 5.

wife. One example can be found in a commonly cited hadith in which Prophet Muhammad was reported to have said that, “If I had commanded anyone to prostrate to another, I would have commanded a wife to prostrate to her husband.”³⁸ Legal scholars used this hadith to defend the husband’s lordship over his wife which was divinely ordained, and sanctioned by the Qur’an. Today, traditionalists can no longer straightforwardly argue that female obedience to husbands was ordained by God. They must situate the patriarchal marriage in a modern context where the dominant cultural ideal is based on egalitarianism and individual choice.

Yasir Qadhi, an influential American imam who regularly speaks at ICNA events, gave a talk at the MAS-ICNA 2013 Convention that was about relationships.³⁹ The premise of it was that women and men, being biologically different, had different needs, and knowledge of this would improve people’s marriages. In this context, Qadhi explains that the prostration that the hadith mentions are “the prostration of respect.” “And what does this show?” he asks, “That the wife gives respect to the husband. And what will the husband give back? That love, that cherishing, that nurturing that the craves.” Qadhi goes on to explain that respect means trusting a husband’s judgement, not nagging, and when being critical turns out to be necessary, then to do it in a gentle tone. Giving the example of reminding the husband to fix the leaky faucet, he suggests that the wife, should in a placating tone, say something like, I know you have other things to do, when you have a chance, can you take care of that.”

In doing this, Qadhi is calling on the woman’s ability to persuade, be gentle. If the wife does these things, she will have a happy marriage. Qadhi goes on to instruct men that if they

³⁸ Ayesha Chaudhry, *Domestic Violence*, 42-43.

³⁹ Yasir Qadhi, “What Men and Women need to Know About Each Other” (June 14, 2013), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UqtBCxspzJw&t=4s>

want their wives to respect them, then they must show their wives affection. In this discussion, it is acknowledged that a husband's happiness in marriage is dependent on the happiness of his wife. Yet husbands are supposed to be the heads of households because their income is theoretically the only one that supports the family. Because a husband is the leader, his behavior and disposition potentially play a deciding factor in how much power a wife has in a relationship.

When people talk about the more troublesome implications of wifely obedience, they often have in mind domestic violence. In marriages where wives and husbands have strong partnerships, the concept of obedience can have the effect of making a husband feel entitled to his wife's time or household labor. In relationships that are understood to be between willing individuals who have mutual respect for one another, the whole concept of obedience is rendered unthreatening.

Obedience to God and obedience to husbands has always had the potential to clash. Religious scholars have tried to smooth over this inconsistency, and uphold male dominance at the same time, by suggesting that women can disobey their husbands in things that are religiously obligatory. But husbands are allowed to prevent women from performing extra fasts or prayers if it interferes with his right to sex. This contradiction has been the bane of the lives of conservative religious women since the activism of Zainab al-Ghazali (1918-2005), a female leader of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, and pioneering Daiya.

Zainab al-Ghazali was the pioneer of a discourse on women that remains popular today. At age sixteen, she joined the Egyptian Feminist Union but soon left it because of its secular orientation. Ghazali went on to found her own organization, the Muslim Women's Union, which promoted Islamic ideals. Women did not need secular feminism because Islam had already given

rights to women. Zainab al-Ghazali believed that women should be able to take part in public life, and even run for political office in Muslim countries but only if their obligations as wives and mothers remained their first priority. But Al-Ghazali could not live out this ideal in her own personal life. She divorced her first husband because her marriage, she said, “took all my time and kept me from my mission”. In al-Ghazali’s understanding, her obligation to God truly was in conflict with her obligation to her husband. However, she had the financial resources and emotional support needed in order to live without a husband. Where does this leave women who actually do choose to prioritize their families over careers but find themselves married to men who are not as religious as they are? Even women who do work must contend with social consequences for themselves or emotional turmoil for their children, if they extricate themselves from the joint life they shared with a husband who will not support them wearing hijab or fasting during Ramadan.

The obligation to obey a husband or father potentially empowers men who are not religious to abuse their more religious female kin. Several studies have documented this problem in Muslim religious movements. In her ethnography of British Salafi women, Inge found that those who wore niqabs (face veils) met extreme opposition.⁴⁰ According to Inge, all converts to Salafism wore the niqab or abaya out of choice. The Salafi converts were all teenagers or young adults of mostly Somali origin who lived with their families. Some parents reacted by threatening to throw their daughters out of the house. Others wore the niqab in secret, and others gave up wearing it altogether. However, scholars understand covering the face to be optional rather than obligatory enabling some girls to respond to heavy parental pressure by taking it off. However, children financially and emotionally depend on their parents, and parents expect their

⁴⁰ Anabel Inge, *The Making of a Salafi Muslim Woman*, 161.

authority to be absolute. At the same time, children raised in the West are affected by the individualistic society around them. They can see themselves as distinct individuals separate from their families who are free to make their own decisions. By contrast, obedience to husbands is mediated by the companionate ideal. Wives are not supposed to rebel. They are supposed to cooperate and persuade.

IX. Obedience vs. Pious Practice?

For several interviewees, one of the most contentious aspects of their new-found piety was wearing hijab. A discussion of two of these stories illustrates the possibilities and limits provided by complementarianism.

For Afiya, wearing a hijab was an evolutionary process. Growing up in Pakistan, she had covered herself with a chador. When she came to the United States in 1987, she stopped covering her hair because she felt uncomfortable about looking different. After learning about why it was necessary, she decided to return to covering her hair. Her husband was not ready for it:

My husband was not ready for that at that time. So, I was not being obedient in that way because he did not want me to. *Alhumdullilah*, it worked out. I convinced him why I should cover. Because I told him you're more important to me better than other men. So I should not expose my beauty. And *alhumdulilah*, then he was convinced and he also joined ICNA classes. Then he was closer to Qur'an than ever before. *Alhumdulilah*, it worked well.⁴¹

⁴¹Afiya, Interview by author, July 28, 2019.

Tabassum too, faced opposition from her husband for wearing hijab:

My husband wasn't religious at all. He doesn't care. He didn't like hijab. He still doesn't like it. He liked me the way I was. But I said no, that's what Allah wants. That's the way I want to do it. It still creates problems off and on because whenever I am going with him, he doesn't want me to cover my head. He said I don't like it. You look weird. Blah blah blah. But it does affect my relationship somehow because I changed a lot. Because I was quiet, a little bit... I would say more modernized. My dressing, my living. In Pakistan, I was in medical school. I was a pretty, modern girl. I dressed well. I was wearing high heeled shoes, the fashionable clothes and dresses. It's like conservative in dress. I never exposed the body. But I was wearing whatever the fashion was. That's the way I was.

Then I changed when I came to this country. My husband didn't like it. It does effect on my relationship, and it still effecting on and off. When he saw me not paying attention on myself. To be honest, this is not religion teaching me. Actually, my teachers or my group setting, they are encouraging us to stay in your home as much fashionable as you can. If I started doing that, my teachers would be happy. Unfortunately I'm not doing it. Generally, he didn't like hijab. So it does affect a little bit but I'm surviving. I try to obey, and I do things sometimes which I don't want to just because he wants it. So I did try to minimize resistance in my life. Sometimes I do the stuff which he likes it. Sometimes, I do the things whatever he wants to, and I don't want it. But I think he's right. He has a right. So of course, if I'm not gonna do it. If I'm gonna give him the opportunity to another woman. First complainer gonna be me, and I'm gonna be responsible. Allah gonna ask me: why you didn't do that when your husband is asking. So, he's not asking for something very wrong.⁴²

These stories show the limits and possibilities of moral reasoning. Afiya was able to convince her husband that veiling is a religious obligation and called upon the male sense of jealousy to persuade him.

Objections to Muslim women adopting the hijab, or other markers of a strict lifestyle is a phenomenon that is well documented in studies of Muslim religious movements. . Opposition to

⁴² Tabassum, Interview by author, January 26, 2020.

veiling by family members is based on fears that women have adopted extremist ideologies or will be discriminated against. In contrast, the starting point of the women was that they were fulfilling a religious obligation by veiling. Their husbands did not understand this and needed to be educated.

Both women shared a common moral framework with their spouses and tried to use their common beliefs to convince their husbands to accept their choices. It worked for Afiya. Her husband already accepted common religious beliefs and was therefore more inclined to listen to his wife and become more religious. By contrast, the message of Tabassum's story is unclear. It cannot be categorized as an act of resistance against patriarchy because Tabassum does not see herself in this way. She blames herself for not being available enough to her husband sexually rather than her husband's lack of religious commitment. Yet she is hardly a passive victim. She continues to wear hijab when she is able to, to attend *dars*, and to remain with her husband and children.

In Pakistan, Tabassum and her husband would have depended on hired help, and on her husband's extended family for financial support and childcare. In the United States, Tabassum and her husband both worked as doctors to provide a comfortable life for their four children. Tabassum also did most of the housework and childcare which arguably made her husband dependent on her. Tabassum built a life with her husband and has chosen to continue doing so despite their disagreements. Her life defies easy categorization as the life who is liberated or submissive. She downplays her agency throughout her story notably in describing how she had to convince her husband to leave Pakistan. Although she is an assertive person who continues to do whatever she wants, she is not a feminist. She still believes that she should obey her husband

and participates in a religious movement that others would think of as patriarchal. But like others profiled here, she asserted herself through a form of Islamist piety.

X. Conclusion

Asking whether Muslim women are oppressed is unhelpful. This question presumes that there is a binary between oppressed and oppressor, oppressed and liberator, and that the lives of women can neatly fit into this or any other framework. This binary presumes that women actually see their sense of self as being that of a victim who wants her society to completely different so that she can be free. In such a binary, America would represent the land of the free, and the women profiled here would jump at the chance to go. As we saw earlier, this was not the case because all of the women were happy about life in Pakistan. As far as they were concerned, they were submitting to circumstance not freeing themselves from oppression. If anything, it could be argued that men were oppressing their wives by making the decision about where the family would live, then expecting their wives to follow them.

Once in the United States, women needed to find new kinds of community and sociability. They found these things and more in the study they attended. Removed from politics of back home, ICNA represented an innocuous social organization whose members were perfectly ordinary fellow immigrants who were offering practical and spiritual help through the study circle. Women who came study circles saw their religion and themselves in a new way. They saw themselves as Muslims, as people who should care about deep religious matters and use their new knowledge to become better, pious subjects. This was not a break with their upbringings because Islamist piety, like Pakistani culture, stresses obligation to family life.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Can you introduce yourself?
2. How important was religion to your family? What kind of religious education did you have? Did you wear a chador or hijab while growing up?
3. Why did you come to America? What year did you come?
4. What was your impression of society when you first came to America?
5. Why did you move to Staten Island? How did you meet other Muslims on Staten Island? What was the Muslim community like when you were first here?
6. How did you come to join ICNA?
7. Did being involved in dars every week create any conflict between you and your husband? If so, how was it handled? How were you able to raise a family?
8. What did you believe about the roles of men and women in Islam? How did it work in your family?
9. What was the evolution of your practices over time? Did you pray or fast more? Did you decide to wear hijab in America? If you did, what were the reactions of other people i.e., your husband, your in-laws, your coworkers?

APPENDIX B

IRB APPROVAL



University Integrated Institutional Review Board
 205 East 42 Street
 New York, NY 10017
<http://www.cuny.edu/research/compliance.html>

Exemption Granted

04/17/2020

Aisha Raheel,
 The Graduate School & University Center

RE: IRB File #2020-0029

Conservative Muslim Women as Repugnant Cultural Other: The Experiences of ICNA Women in New York

Dear Aisha Raheel,

Your Exemption Request was reviewed on 04/17/2020, and it was determined that your research protocol meets the criteria for exemption, in accordance with CUNY HRPP Procedures: Human Subject Research Exempt from IRB Review, EXEMPT WITH LIMITED REVIEW - (2)

(iii) Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) and the information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by #11.111(a)(7) You may now begin your research.

Please note the following information about your approved research protocol:

Documents / Materials:

Type	Description	Version #	Date
Interview Questions	Survey	1	
Interview Question(s)	Interview Questions AR reserach.pdf	1	03/31/2020
Internet Recruitment Material	ICF-_4.2020 AR PROJECT.docx	1	04/05/2020

Although this research is exempt, you have responsibilities for the ethical conduct of the research and must comply with the following:

Amendments: You are responsible for reporting any amendments or changes to your research protocol that may affect the determination of exemption and/or the specific category to the HRPP.



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The amendment(s) or change(s) may result in your research no longer being eligible for the exemption that has been granted.

Final Report: You are responsible for submitting a final report to the HRPP at the end of the study.

Please remember to:

- Use **the HRPP file number** 2020-0029 on all documents or correspondence with the HRPP concerning your research protocol.
- Review and comply with CUNY Human Research Protection Program [policies and procedures](#).

If you have any questions, please contact:

Lynda Mules 212-237-
8914
lmules@jjay.cuny.ed

