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# **Social Justice, Politics of Authorisation and Agency: A hybrid theoretical framework to study Muslim femininity in India**

## **1.1.Introduction**

Sociological research on Muslim women in the contemporary world is wrought with political, ideological and, consequently, theoretical conundrums. In the West, Muslim women are seen as carriers of culture, as embodiment of collective honour (Archer, 2002) and as ‘veiled, exotic and oppressed by Islam’ (Khan, 2005:2023–4) while others highlight Islamic traditions and gendered customs underpinning their oppression (Afshar, 1985, Odeh 1993). Still others challenge the Orientalist assumptions behind the overemphasis on Muslim women’s subordination (Moghadam, 1994, Dwyer, 1999, Shein, 2000, Abu-Lughod, 2002; Lewis, 2006; Razack, 2004), highlighting the wide variety of socio-political and economic contexts that Muslim women navigate in their lives. More recently, Rashid (2016) shows how UK government’s counter-terrorism policies seeking to empower Muslim women often have the counter-productive effect of removing their agency. She skilfully unpicks the ways in which policies view Muslim women seen solely in relation to their religious affiliation and co-opt the feminist rhetoric of empowerment and personal freedoms towards the counter-terrorism policy.

Surprisingly, unlike in the Muslim minority contexts in the West there is limited research of Muslim women in India. Mohua Sarkar’s (2001) research systematically maps Muslim women’s erasure from colonial and nationalist historiography and their relegation to the position of the ‘other’ in the colonial and post-colonial India. Notably, Zoya Hasan and Ritu Menon’s (2004) Muslim Women’s Survey, Jeffery and Jeffery’s (2002) research on saffron demography<sup>1</sup> and sections of the Sachar Committee Report (2006) are some of the notable exceptions that highlight Muslim women’s disadvantaged social location in contemporary

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<sup>1</sup> A phrase used to describe alarmist Hindu supremacist claims around Muslim women’s sexuality and fecundity

India. However, in the absence of systematic sociological or feminist theorisation these studies also feed into the notion that 'Muslim women' represent a distinct category with a common identity and set of interests (Kirmani, 2008, 2009). More recently, Kirmani's (2008, 2009) research on Delhi's Zakir Nagar and Chakraborty's (2009, 2015) research in *bustis* of Kolkata have demonstrated the diversity of subject positions Muslim women inhabit in contemporary India. Khan's (2007) study shows Muslim women's negotiations of their gender and religious identity within a Mumbai locality connecting restrictions imposed on them by their family with the wider exclusion of the Muslim community in the city. Khan (2007) and Chakraborty (2009, 2015) brings out age-specific nuances in Muslim femininity by exploring the peculiar nature of surveillance experienced by young women and girls within the community. The political relevance of thinking critically about girlhoods in the developing country context has been highlighted by Khoja Moolji's (2018) research in Pakistan. She unpacks how projects for girls' education are seamlessly being translated into projects of empowerment for girls and ultimately into national developmental projects erasing structural inequalities at local, national and international levels.

The current paper based on my doctoral research project titled 'Muslim Girlhoods in Assam: Questions of Recognition and Redistribution', attends to the task of developing a rigorous theoretical framework to understand contemporary Muslim femininity in India, and more widely in Muslim minority contexts. Following Khoja Moolji (2018) my orientation to gender in this paper is informed by feminist poststructuralist theories that direct researchers to consider the discursive practices that brings subjects into being. Such an approach also considers modalities of power that authorises particular representational claims about these subjects. Thus, even when my research focussed on Muslim girls in the 12-18-years age group, and on Muslim women per se, I draw upon wider discourses around gender, class, religion and ethnicity that produce all Muslim feminine subjects, in certain ways irrespective of their age.

Thus, the terms Muslim 'girl' and 'woman' have been used interchangeably in this paper, to indicate the feminine Muslim subject. Following Khoja Moolji (2018), this paper is attuned to the intricacies of the contemporary politics of girlhoods, but it deliberately focuses upon the much broader project of breaking some of the theoretical impasses in conceptualising and representing Muslim femininity. The theoretical framework in this paper is revealed through a series of reflective accounts of conundrums faced in the course of doing research on Muslim girls in Assam. These account emerges both from a situated reflexive understanding of my own positionality as a diasporic, middle-class-Assamese-speaking-Muslim-woman and my interactions with Assamese and Bengali speaking school going Muslim girls from varied class backgrounds discussed elaborately in my upcoming monograph (Hussain 2019). However, this type of reflexivity goes beyond the act of reflecting upon one's experience (England 1994). Reflecting about ways of thinking and writing about Muslim feminine subjects was an exercise of 'uncomfortable reflexivity' for me. Following Pillow (2003:176) uncomfortable reflexivity is not about better methods, or about whether we can represent people better but, as Visweswaran (1994:32) states, "whether we can be accountable to people's struggles for self-representation and self-determination". This type of reflexivity holds researchers and writers to account for the ways in which they represent their research subjects.

My research project started with the aim to understand the experiences of Muslim girls within various educational settings and to sociologically theorise their links with their empirical educational backwardness demonstrated by Sachar (2006), Hasan and Menon (2005). In the course of my fieldwork in Assam's Nagaon district, I conducted in-depth interviews with thirty-seven Muslim girls, twenty-six parents and twenty-one teachers to understand questions surrounding Muslim girls' educational experiences in varied schooling contexts. I also analysed key educational policy texts to understand how education policies were creating types of Muslim subjects. While engaging with my material, I was faced with a disconnect between the

empirical material and the theoretical frameworks available to analyse and discuss them coherently, whilst being accountable in my writings to the struggles of Muslim women and girls against various structures of domination. On one hand, there were questions around the politics of knowledge production and the choice of theoretical frameworks originating in the feminist traditions of the South or North. On the other hand, there were questions around possible conflicts between Muslim girls' gender rights and the minority rights of the Muslim community. My data lent itself towards varied conceptions of 'Muslim girl' emerging from the narratives in educational policy and of the teachers, parents and the girls themselves. There were also overlapping themes around gendered discipline both in teachers' and parents' narratives, and there were themes around educational, economic and social aspirations in the narratives of the Muslim girls and their parents. By and large, however, these narratives contested and challenged each other, destabilising the convenient gender category of 'Muslim girl'. I also understood that their educational experiences were shaped by the subjective possibilities assigned to them by various actors involved in their education – the state (through policies), parents, teachers and themselves. This led me to expand my focus from experienced identity to conferred identity (Lawler, 2004) with a view to reveal the inner workings of the various axes of power at play within the field of education. Further, Muslim girls' lived experiences then began to manifest in their narratives as varied 'storylines' of identity. These storylines were neither clearly articulating a sense of victimhood, nor an explicit agency aimed at changing their disadvantaged social location. These articulations created further conundrums around the nature of agency of Muslim girls and its relationship with liberal feminist concept of agency. To address these distinct but interconnected dilemmas systematically, I felt the need for a hybrid theoretical framework building upon the existing theorisations in areas of social justice, politics of authorisation and agency. Such a theory

doesn't just include the hybrid post-colonial identity but also a hybrid of theoretical frameworks needed to understand how identities are conferred, negotiated and challenged.

Departing slightly from the convention of academic writing, this paper reflects on five key conundrums in doing research on Muslim women and girls, and discusses intellectual maneuvers in response to them in the context of my research. Notably, in this paper I specifically attend to conundrums of conceptualising and representing Muslim femininity in a multicultural society like India. The paper proposes a hybrid theoretical framework for the study of Muslim femininity. This framework attends to the Third-world feminist critique of liberal feminism and of the global asymmetric architecture of knowledge production. It also contributes towards strengthening the transformative politics of economic redistribution, while attending to contextual historic nuances of India's, specifically Assam's, post-colonial location. This paper is divided into five sections, each corresponding to a conundrum. The first conundrum I discuss here is the choice of theoretical framework in the light of the division of intellectual labour in academia between theory producing North and data producing South, as highlighted by Connell (2007). It unveils the location of knowledge production, with particular attention to sociology and its tendency to universalise ideas from 'the North'. The next section discusses the conundrum in understanding Muslim girls' educational disadvantage socio-culturally and economically at the same time. This section is devoted to introducing Nancy Fraser's work on social justice through remedies of recognition and redistribution, as a possible way to understand policy responses to Muslim women's educational deprivation in India. The Third section discusses the conundrum of paying attention to the gender justice for Muslim women in India while protecting and securing the minority rights of the Muslim community. This section addresses the artificial divide between minority rights and gender rights by using Fraser's conceptual distinction between affirmative and transformative recognition and redistribution to qualify what sort of recognition and redistribution will create conditions of

social justice for marginalised groups. While Fraser's formulation helps us conceptualise distinct forms of injustices as socio-economic (maldistribution) and symbolic/cultural (misrecognition), it does not offer many insights into the process of authorisation of certain claims of justice or certain types of identities. In the fourth section, I discuss the incorporation of local processes of domination and subordination into my analysis by paying attention to multiple axes of power such as class, gender, ethnicity, and religion. This section particularly concerns itself with feminist appropriations of Pierre Bourdieu's scholarship on the politics of authorisation, to map out the various intersecting forms of power that underpin the process of pathologisation of particular groups of people. Following Steph Lawler and Bev Skeggs's appropriation of Bourdieu, the concept of cultural authorisation is deployed to reveal the politics of authorisation through which certain types of femininity are 'conferred' upon Muslim girls. These axes of identity through which the politics of authorisation (or rules of engagement) are operationalized in the field of education in Nagaon discussed in this paper are: (a) middle-classness, (b) respectable femininity or good girlhood, and (c) Hindu normativity. The last section addresses the conundrum of capturing Muslim girls' expression of agency and victimhood simultaneously. This section lays out the theoretical framework to capture how the school-going Muslim girls in my study bid for cultural authorisations in their lives by adhering to, resisting, negotiating, or challenging the rules of engagement, thereby, demonstrating an agency beyond the liberal feminist conception of agency as resistance. It makes a case for Harris and Dobson's (2015) conception of 'suffering actors' to capture a range of subject positions between victimhood and resistance. In doing so, my analysis explores how Muslim girls talk back to the conferred subjectivities through their experienced subjectivities. The paper concludes by highlighting the key features of the proposed hybrid framework and its wider importance for doing research on Muslim women and girls in future.

## **1.2. Northern theory, southern data**

As a feminist academic from the global 'South', trained in the 'North', the asymmetry of feminist and sociological knowledge production is apparent to me. Connell (2015:50) says, 'The great bulk of feminist writing that circulates internationally and discusses the global South is empirical, descriptive, or policy writing. If there is theory in it – conceptualisation, methodology, or explanatory frameworks – the theory almost always comes from the global North'. For my research this raised uncomfortable yet pertinent questions around knowledge production in 'Western'/ 'Northern' feminist theory and the location of 'Southern' women, scholars and practitioners in them. A North-South binary division according to Lundstrom (2009) inexorably alludes simplistically to geographical locations without paying attention to the centre-periphery relations within the countries of the global North or South. In the context of India, for instance, can upper-caste Brahminical or Hindu nationalist forms of knowledge production and theorisation be seen as 'Southern theory'? Narayan (1998:87) warns us against culture-specific essentialist generalizations that depend on totalizing categories such as 'Western culture' 'Non-western cultures' or 'Western women' 'Third World women' and so forth. Further, where do diasporic scholars like myself, fit in this North-South binary. Without disregarding the wider political project of decolonisation of knowledge production, it is important to problematise the binary conception of Northern and Southern theory. Toril Moi emphasises the need for 'feminist appropriation' or 'creative transformation' of various theoretical and intellectual traditions (Moi, 1991). Further, Moi (1991:1017) conceptualises appropriation as 'critical assessment of a given theory formation with a view to taking it over and using it for feminist purposes'. When deploying Northern theorists such as Bourdieu, Fraser and Skeggs to analyse Southern data, I found myself probing my theoretical framework to see if it produced a recognisable feminist impact through the specific type of appropriation I was undertaking. Thus, in appropriating the works of Northern theorists the following

maneuver from Mohanty's (1988, 2003) scholarship on Third-world feminism were adapted to challenge the northern-ness of feminist and sociological theories:

- Challenge the claim of universality by paying attention to intersections of gender, race, class, ethnicity, and nation pertaining to their locations enabling us to examine and analyse Third-world women's oppression and resistance on the ground, in their historical specificity (Mohanty, 1988: 2–3).
- Attend to historic erasures by paying attention to the ways Muslim women and girls come to be (in)visible in contemporary educational policies.
- Acknowledge the centrality of colonialism to the processes of identity formation in the global South by deploying a contingent and complex reading of the identity of Muslim girls in contemporary India, focusing on their unstable, hybrid and fractured nature, as suggested by post-colonial theorists like Bhabha (1984) and Spivak (1988).
- Acknowledge Muslim women and girls' 'historical and political' agency and activism by respecting their 'epistemic privilege' (Mohanty, 2003: 511) concerning events and conditions that affect their lives even if these may not conform to Western feminist notions about agency.

### **1.3. Understanding Muslim girls' educational disadvantage Socio-cultural and economically**

Much of the mainstream conceptualisation of socio-economic disadvantage of Muslims in India generally, and that of Muslim women in particular, is narrated in the language of social exclusion. Characterised as multi-dimensional, multi-level, relational, process-oriented and social-actor focused (de Haan, 1999; Sen, 2000; Silver, 1998), social exclusion has offered a useful framework to conceptualise Muslim women's educational exclusion in India. The weakness of the social exclusion framework lies in its inability to engage with the issue of social justice, and its consequent inadequacy in offering an agenda for transformative change

for those deemed to be excluded (Sayed and Soudlin, 2009). In my research, I found that school-going Muslim girls face varying types of socio-economic injustice on account of their lack of access to quality education, poverty, etc. They also suffer varying degrees of cultural/symbolic injustices such as stigmatisation of their Muslim and/or Bengali identities, stereotypical representations, the lack of positive role models in popular culture, along with being gendered bearers of Muslim communal identity and family honour. The question then becomes whether Muslim girls' educational disadvantages can be resolved using socio-economic or cultural/symbolic measures.

Nancy Fraser's scholarship offers a way forward to think about socio-economic and cultural/symbolic injustices experienced by Muslim girls in India simultaneously. The yardstick of social justice in Fraser's formulation is participatory parity, defined as 'social arrangements that permit all members of a society to participate in social interactions with peers' (Fraser, 2007: 27). She lays out her framework for perspectival dualism that allows us to understand Muslim girls' educational deprivation as cultural and material at the same time (Fraser, 1997). In her words,

Examples [of socio-economic injustice] include exploitation (having the fruits of one's labour appropriated for the benefits of others); economic marginalisation (being confined to undesirable or poorly paid work or being denied access to income generating labour altogether), and deprivation (being denied an adequate material standard of living). Examples [of cultural or symbolic injustice] include cultural domination (being subjected to patterns of interpretation and communication that are associated with another culture and are alien and/or hostile to one's own); non-recognition (being rendered invisible by means of the authoritative representational communicative and interpretative practices of one's culture); and disrespect (being

routinely maligned or disparaged in stereotypical public cultural representations and/or in everyday life interactions) (Fraser, 1997:13-14).

In this formulation, remedies for socio-economic injustice is 'redistribution' and those for cultural injustice is 'recognition'. Fraser (1997:15) asserts that while these distinctions between injustices are analytical, in practice they are deeply intertwined, resulting in 'a vicious circle of cultural and economic subordination'. In fact, her framework helps to analyse economic and cultural injustices simultaneously. It is concerned less with individual measures of recognition and redistribution, and more with the final outcome of participatory parity. In my research, Fraser's conception of injustices as bivalent collectivities offered an alternative conception of cultural recognition by treating it as a question of social status of Muslim girls as full partners in social interaction. This non-identitarian model of recognition helped in reconceptualising Muslim girls' struggles for recognition in a way that they can be integrated with struggles for redistribution, rather than displacing and undermining them. By applying this analytical model to educational policies in post-colonial India, I was able to identify that the education policy regime is geared towards protecting Muslim girls' cultural rights through remedies of recognition, and inadequately geared towards protecting their socio-economic rights through remedies of redistribution. In focusing disproportionately on Muslim 'culture' educational policies create a 'package picture of culture' (Narayan 2000:1083). This view understands "cultures on the model of neatly wrapped packages, sealed off from each other, possessing sharply defined edges or contours, and having distinctive contents that differ from those of other 'cultural package'" (Narayan 2000:1084). In education policy, the Muslim 'cultural package' was found to include provisions such as Madrassa/Maktab<sup>2</sup> education, gender-segregation, Urdu learning, culturally appropriate dressing for girls, but doesn't include equal

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<sup>2</sup> Types of Islamic schools

provision of high quality education in government schools. Such a script of 'difference' poses serious threats to the feminist agendas in third-world contexts, since it often dictates norms of femininity for the idealised and the othered women. Thus, by looking at socio-economic and cultural/symbolic injustices simultaneously, Fraser's model enabled me to avoid both gender essentialism and cultural essentialism in my research.

#### **1.4. Protecting Muslim women's rights while securing the minority rights of the Muslim community in India**

Muslim women's rights in India have long been the subject of an impasse between minority rights of the Muslim community and gender rights of Muslim women. Muslim women's rights are often either conflated with the rights of the Muslim community or are viewed as being in a opposition with the rights of the Muslim community as a minority in India (Hussain, 2019; Solanki, 2013; Agnes, 2001). Despite 'formal constitutional guarantees of equality, Muslim women's lives within the family are regulated and structured by explicitly discriminatory personal laws' (Hasan, 1994: 59). However, the politics of reforming Muslim personal laws has so far been hijacked by the right-wing Hindutva, forcing Muslim women's groups to be extremely cautious of demanding gender justice. The feminist intellectual task in this scenario, following Fraser (1997: 21-22), is to ask, 'How can feminists fight simultaneously to abolish differentiation and to valorise gender specificity?' Writing in the American context, she raises a very specific question for American feminists, 'How can anti-racists fight simultaneously to abolish "race" and to valorise the cultural specificity of subordinated racialised groups?' (Fraser, 1997). In the Indian context, one of the ways in which we can pose this question is, how can Muslim women's rights in India be secured while securing the minority rights of the Muslim community. To resolve this conundrum, Fraser's (1995, 1997, 2003) scholarship offers two strategies. First, she offers a conceptual distinction between affirmative and transformative recognition and redistribution. For Fraser (1997: 23), affirmative remedies are those 'aimed at

correcting inequitable outcomes of social arrangements without disturbing the underlying framework that generates them’, and transformative remedies are those ‘aimed at correcting inequitable outcomes precisely by restructuring the underlying generative framework’. Transformative redistribution is aimed at the deep restructuring of the relations of production associated with the political project of socialism; it tends to blur group differentiation and can also help redress some forms of cultural misrecognition. Affirmation recognition is the cultural analogue of the liberal welfare state, typically associated with mainstream multi-culturalism. It follows a strategy of surface reallocations of respect among existing groups. And finally, transformation recognition, the cultural analogue of transformation redistribution, is the project of deconstruction, focused on the deep restructuring of the power relations of recognition. These conceptual distinctions allow us to qualify what sorts of recognition and redistribution will create conditions of social justice for marginalised groups using a framework of justice based on four political orientations: affirmative redistribution, affirmation recognition, transformative redistribution and transformative recognition. Chigateri (2004:325) finds this distinction useful to ‘sift through differences between communities that are to be celebrated, rejected or taken on as ethic for everyone.’ Second, by applying the normative yardstick of participatory parity twice, Fraser (1997, Keddie (2012) conceptualise Muslim womens’ claims for gender justice within the Muslim community and in the wider society, as intragroup and intergroup claims. When applied in my analysis this maneuver allowed me to assess the effects of institutionalised processes of cultural domination of the Muslim community vis-à-vis the majority Hindu community and the internal effects of the practices of the Muslim community and families upon Muslim girls’ education. Such an approach avoids pitting Muslim women’s claims for gender justice against Muslim community’s minority rights, by paying attention to both inter and intragroup level of injustices

### **1.5. Processes of domination and subordination: class, gender, ethnicity and religion**

My empirical data pointed me towards very specific classed, gendered and even ethnicised ways in which Muslim girls were viewed by various social actors. While Fraser's (1995; 1997) formulation offers tools to understand bivalent/intersecting forms of injustices and the types of redressal mechanisms, its usefulness is limited in analysing how certain claims of social justice or identity come to be legitimised over others. Pierre Bourdieu's scholarship on the politics of authorisation offer analytical tools to understand the naturalisation, and thereby legitimisation, of relations of power and gendered, class and ethnicised subordination of Muslim girls that my data was alluding to. Feminist scholars working with Bourdieu's conceptual apparatus have helped us understand how middle-class femininities are normalised and working-class femininities are pathologised (Lawler, 2004: 114), and how working-class women seek symbolic authorisations through the practice of respectability- 'a respectability defined in opposition to the middle-class' (Skeggs, 2004:25). In post-colonial, non-Western settings such as India, the pursuit of authorisation through enactments of respectable femininity have been linked to the interplay of colonial/nationalist constructions of womanhood, and the solidification of (middle) class identities and nation-building (Radhakrishnan, 2009; 2011, Hussein 2018, Hussein 2017). In my research, I deploy Bourdieu's theorisation around cultural authorisation in the field of education to bring to bear the politics of authorisation or 'rules of engagement' through which certain types of femininities are 'conferred' upon school-going Muslim girls in the study (Lawler, 2004: 114). My data was categorised using three particular rules of engagement ('rules' henceforth), namely: middle-class-ness, respectable femininity/good girlhood, and Hindu normativity, where socio-economic and cultural/symbolic considerations interact with each other. The 'rules' are understood here as culturally authorised or normative forms of being, in relation to which subjectivities conferred

to social actors. Such a conception of ‘rules of engagement’ helps in factoring in multiple axes of power operational in the context of my research.

### **1.5.1. Middle-class-ness**

The respondents in my study came from varied economic backgrounds – upper-, middle- and lower- classes, based on the income-based classification by the National Council for Applied Economic Research. Fernandes (2000:91), says ‘such measurements of the middle-classes overlook the importance of converting between different forms of capital, social, cultural, symbolic and economic, in strategies to achieve, maintain or improve middle-class status’. And indeed, Fernandes's critique is applicable not only to the middle-class, but class analysis generally. Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of ‘capitals’ and his theory of practice provide a way to address the critiques of income/occupation based class analysis. Bourdieu’s (1984:114) formulation classifies people by the set of actually usable resources and powers, namely, social capital (connections to high-capital individuals and groups) and cultural capital (education and other forms of knowledge) as well as economic capitals. This framework shows that class is not only about income, but also about social and cultural production and reproduction of privilege in different systems of hierarchy: occupational, income, prestige and so on. Bourdieu’s theory of practice views class as being constantly reproduced through embodied practices of social actors trying to reproduce and access certain class position through them. According to him, through socialisation in a particular class position, external structures, particularly social power relations, are inscribed on the body in the form of the habitus, the ‘systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structures pre-disposed to function as structuring structures’ (Bourdieu, 1990: 53). Paying attention to these class practices shows the nature of the politics of authorisation, revealing who seeks to legitimise themselves and others in what sorts of ways. This middle class engages in a global economy of work and consumption on behalf of the Indian nation (Deshpande, 2003) and is a central agent in reimagining the

nation (Fernandes, 2000) as modern, technologically advanced, meritocratic and so on. Instead of 'class' per say, I use 'middle-class' as one of the rules in my analysis given the ideological weight and hegemonic nature of middle-classes in post-colonial India (Chatterjee, 1989; Deshpande, 2003; Fernandes, 2000). I deploy middle-class-ness as one of the rules of engagement in my research, viewing it simultaneously as economic and cultural, and as a social position and as a practice. This an original conception of middle-class-ness as yardstick of normative identity that can be deployed fruitfully in other country contexts of newly emerging and influential middle-classes.

### **1.5.2. Respectable femininity/ Good girlhood**

Studies have shown that gender has historically been central to class practices and the reproduction of class. In pre-independence India, middle-class women became the bearers of a modern nationalist culture, which was superior to both the cultures of the Western and of traditional or lower-class India (Chatterjee, 1989). Post-colonial constructions of Indian women hinge upon a notion of the family and idealised forms of domesticity (Mankekar, 1999; Rao, 1996). In the contemporary post-globalisation era, the success of Indian women in international beauty pageants and their increasing participation in the IT workforce has signaled the arrival of the 'global' Indian woman: a virtuous woman who could be a global worker and consumer while remaining 'essentially' Indian (Radhakrishnan, 2011, 2009; Thapan, 2004; Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003). This new formulation of femininity is referred to as respectable femininity. Radhakrishnan (2009), Hussein (2018) understand respectable femininity as a type of symbolic capital in Bourdieu's formulation, such that it creates cultural authorisation not only for individuals but also for groups as 'respectable'. In other words, conceptualising respectable femininity as a constitutive element of 'symbolically authorised middle-class-ness' (Radhakrishnan, 2009: 201). In this framework, it is not just education or tastes that constitute symbolic capital: respectable femininity and its association with the family

and female domesticity also constitute forms of symbolic capital. Using this concept in my analysis, I am able to connect performances of certain gender practices by Muslim families in my study to the pursuit of familial class interests. Chakraborty further identifies public perception, i.e. the image of being good, as central to the concept of good Muslim girls. That means private transgressive actions such as suggestive Bollywood dancing is not necessarily seen as detrimental to the idea of good girlhood as long as it is shielded from the public gaze. Another key theme around good Muslim girlhood is that of *izzat* or honour, which is narrated in everyday discourses as ‘saving face’, ‘good reputation’, ‘good family’, ‘shaming the family’ and so on, ultimately connecting the idea of ‘good girls’ with that of sexuality, risk and patriarchal power (Chakraborty, 2015). Both Radhakrishnan (2009) and Chakaraborty (2015) show that idealized notions of womanhood and girlhood work as a symbolic capital and help families to culturally authorise their daughters as legitimate actors in their fields of action while legitimising themselves as ‘middle-class’ in an ideological sense. Bringing the question of respectable femininity into the discussion of politics of authorisation enabled me to make sense of my material in which parents of Muslim girls and the girls themselves frequently spoke about the importance of girls’ education, academic performance and the subsequent possibility of doing ‘respectable’ or ‘appropriate’ jobs. It also helped explain seemingly contradictory ways in which girls’ education was championed across the board, while marriage and family were heavily prioritised, so much so that their career choices were influenced by its role in shaping marital prospects as discussed further in Hussain (2018).

### **1.5.3. Hindu Normativity**

The Indian constitution embeds the idea of secularism as central to public life, while individuals are guaranteed freedom to practice their religion. However, scholars of intergroup relations in South Asia have demonstrated that post-colonial nation building projects have largely been exclusionary and often done with violence upon minorities, lower castes, tribes

and other marginal groups (Anand, 2012). Empirical evidence from India suggests that this Hindu bias permeates India's legal system (Agnes, 2015, 2001), violence (Agnes, 2012; Anand, 2016), and schools and public institutions (Gupta, 2008; Thorat and Attewell, 2007). Unsurprisingly, a pronounced Hindu bias mediates the citizenship regime in India, Assam in particular, where Bengali speaking Hindus are seen as refugees (and subjects of compassion) whereas Bengali speaking Muslims come to be seen as parasitic economic migrants (and a subject of contempt) (Jayal, 2012). Thus, being Hindu (or not) in India plays a key part in the politics of authorisation that individuals and groups partake in. To understand this phenomenon of Hindu bias, I deploy the idea of Hindu normativity from Anustup Basu's scholarship. He argues that the consolidation of a pan-Indian Hindu demographic and religious identity, cutting across myriad local devotional traditions, creates a monotheistic Hindu nation where the socio-political and economic processes are narrated and understood through what he calls the 'informatics of Hindutva' (Basu, 2012: 243). In the post-colonial context, Hindu normativity leads Indian modernity to be determined less by secularisation in a broad liberal sense as stated in the constitution, and more by the construction of a monotheistic form of Hindu religious experience (Basu, 2012:81). According to Basu, this 'single edifice of faith' is inherently connected to the 'discursive imagery of the nation', embedding Hinduism deeply into Indian nationalism (Basu, 2012). In her ethnographic work in government aided schools in the state of Maharashtra in western India, Veronique Benei (2008:2) finds evidence of 'banal nationalism'. She understands banal nationalism as the 'the experience of nationalism being so integral to people's lives that it goes unnoticed most of the time'. She draws attention to the production of Indian national identity through the motif of regional identity through which pupils connect to the nation emotionally. Benei's (2008:5) focus on everyday performances of nationalism and its antagonism towards India's non-Hindu heritage helps to recover 'the emotional and embodied production of the political' in seemingly neutral school settings. In

Assam, the picture surrounding nationalism is complicated further by the focus on Assamese (Khillonjiya) ethno-nationalism, which stigmatises Bengali-speaking Muslims (miyah Muslims) as outsiders or as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. My research captures how banal nationalism is expressed by teachers through the conception of the difference between Assamese- and Bengali-speaking girls, conferring upon them Indian-ness and lack thereof respectively. Scholars of gender and nation have also demonstrated that in most 'nationalist quests for air-tight invariant identities', women are often assigned symbolically crucial roles as markers of the nation's moral values (McClintock, 1993:77). In other words, women (Hindu or otherwise) have a central role to play in the ideological protection of the Hindu nation. The bodies of 'other' women such as Muslim women in India, and more specifically Bengali speaking Muslim women in Assam, come to be constructed as dangerous and disruptive of the idealised moral order and the accepted notions of femininity and respectability (Gangoli, 2012; Skeggs, 1997). Jeffery and Jeffery's (2005) research demonstrate how these 'other' women also get incorporated into the Hindu nationalist imagination through saffron demography: a specific type of study of demography that rationalises the Hindutva political project of Muslim othering by depicting Muslim women's sexuality/fertility as uncontrolled. In this way, Hindu normativity structures the gendered relationships between students, between students and teachers, and between students and the nation. As a rule of engagement, Hindu normativity helped me make sense of the ways in which Hindu nationalism play an important role in the ways Muslim girls could be authorised (or not) as certain types of citizen and as learners in schools.

The axes of dominant power to which Muslim girls in my study are subjected to are along the lines of class, religion/ethnicity, and gender, as have been discussed so far. This enables my research to attend to the multiple positions occupied by Muslim girls in relation to gender, class

(upper/middle/lower), ethnicity and/or religion (as Bengali speaking/Miyah Muslims or Assamese Muslims) and the ways in which these differences reinforce one another. The rules of engagement in the politics of authorisation approach, also lends itself to the intersectional approach to examine how individuals are 'recruited to' categories, i.e. how subjectivities are conferred and how those individuals make choices from 'subject positions' based on their intersectional locations (Adams and Padamsee, 2001). The next section will discuss how connecting the Muslim girls' reflexivity with bids for authorisations of new 'selfhoods' using the 'rules of engagement' in the field of education has implications on the concept of agency in this study.

### **1.6.Expressing agency and victimhood simultaneously**

Flavia Agnes's scholarship has been an exception, in that it has consistently documented Muslim women's agency through their litigations aimed at securing better compensation on divorce, custody of children, child support and so on (Agnes 2001, 2012, 2015). Another study on the reproductive behaviour of Muslim women found that they are not passive followers of anti-contraception religious norms, but show a strong agency in taking an active role in planning their family, thereby transgressing and negotiating religious norms in reproductive matters (Sahu and Hutter 2012). These studies appear to suggest that Muslim women's agency is visible through litigations and active reproductive choices against the gendered reproductive norms of the community. Agency in these formulations comes to be viewed as the opposite of victimhood. According to this view, in only actively opposing the structuring forces in their lives Muslim women can be seen as agential. The consequences of such a dichotomous understanding of victimhood and agency ingrained in liberal feminist thought are two-fold. Firstly, the mis-description of Muslim women's/ girls' agency, ranging from an overemphasis on subordination and silencing of the agency to the overplaying of episodes of resistance and hence an overemphasis on autonomy (Madhok, 2013:104). The second consequence of the

victimhood-agency dichotomy is that the vocabulary available to Muslim women/girls for talking about themselves is either the vocabulary of suffering without agency (victimhood) or agency without suffering. This restricts their ability to express in-between subject positions. Rosalind Gill refers to this dichotomous conception of agency and victimhood as the 'agency pendulum' (Gill, 2008: 38). In her view, the agency pendulum in liberal feminist thought makes it difficult for young women and girls to be recognised as agents while claiming to be affected by patriarchal power structures at home and in their wider social context. Anthropologist Saba Mahmood (2000) is also critical of such binary view of human agency. She views this as a particular form of agency among many, that limits our ability to interrogate the lives of women whose desires and affects are not shaped by non-liberal traditions. In my research also, I felt the need for a conceptual tool to meaningfully account for a diversity of experiences of my respondents. In this regard, Harris and Dobson (2015) offer corrective intervention through the formulation of 'suffering actor' that captures both injury and action in the lives of young women. In their words, 'recasting young women and girls as "suffering actors" may provide one conceptual tool to recognise and work with the impasse of "pure" agent/victim dichotomies' (Harris and Dobson, 2015: 153). Viewing Muslim girls as suffering actors, opens up the conceptual scope for thinking about them as agential subjects without falling into the agency vs. victimhood trap. In doing so in my research, I was able to account for a gamut of experiences and actions that were empowering, disempowering or sometimes both. However, conceptually, I still felt the need to pin down the idea of agency further, in order to avoid overgeneralisations of all action as agency. Bourdieu conceptualizes an unconscious and embodied habitus as generative of all actions. The various characteristics of the 'habitus are enacted unthinkingly; partly defining them as habitual' (Adams, 2006: 515). A reflexive awareness of identity is ruled out when it is placed beyond 'voluntary, deliberate transformation' (Bourdieu, 1977: 94). As such, individuals subject to forces of domination

come to be conceptualised as having little understanding or agency over their subordination (Gilbertson, 2011). Groups, such as the Muslim girls in my study, are conceptualised traditionally as incapable of finding ways to evade or resist the structures of power. Such formulations do not account for the critical awareness with which girls in my study spoke about their class, ethnicity/religion, and gender positions, their future aspirations and the tactics of evading, challenging or leveraging the multiple structures of surveillance to which they are subjected. In such a context, 'it is difficult to know where to place conscious deliberation and awareness in Bourdieu's scheme of things' (Jenkins, 1992: 77).

As alternative to Bourdieu's formulation of habitus, I explored the concept of reflexivity in the scholarship of Anthony Giddens (1991) and Ulrich Beck (1992), who suggest that the economic, cultural and technological changes of late modernity have led to the concept of a 'flexible, authored self, more open, transparent and above all, reflexive' (Adams, 2006: 512). The reflexive self in late modernity is also connected with de-traditionalisation and increasing individualisation, whereby external forms of authority are being replaced by the authority of the individual (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). This has led to identity 'being redefined as a pure reflexive capacity' (Melucci, 1996: 36). Critics have found this to be an excessively uniform analysis, which gives 'short shrift to the structural and cultural factors still at work in fashioning the self' (Tucker, 1998: 208). Others are skeptical of a situation 'where agency is set free from structure' (Lash, 1994: 119), and call for a more nuanced account of degrees of reflexivity, freedom, and constraint in relation to changing, but still powerful, social structures (Adams, 2006). Skeggs's (1997) conception of identity helped think through this habitus-reflexivity conundrum in the context of my research. Commenting on her research on working class white women she says:

It is not an account of how individuals make themselves but how they cannot fail to make themselves in particular ways [...] the women are not the originators of their identities but are located in temporal processes of subjective construction [...] Within these constraints they deploy many constructive and creative strategies to generate a sense of themselves with value. (Skeggs, 1997: 162).

Elsewhere, describing the experiences of the same set of women discussed above in inhabiting certain types of class identity she says:

These women were aware of the perspective of the dominant which was always filtered through class judgments, constantly alert to the way they were judged as sexually excessive, pathologised as fecund and read as bad mothers; they were also critically reflexive about their practice. Their experience was not an unconscious pre-reflexive gendered experience based on misrecognition, but a specifically classed-gendered experience, one of which they were highly critical and highly attuned; they strongly refused the perspectives of the powerful (Skeggs, 2004: 24-25).

Skeggs (2004) finds that women from subordinate groups, whose femininity is not symbolically authorised to bid for authorisations at a local level by 'taking a different perspective and revaluing the positions they are expected to inhabit without value'. Viewed through the lens of the politics of authorisation outlined earlier, reflexivity is the ability to re-evaluate taken-for-granted, conferred subjectivities to forge new selfhoods. For instance, white working class women in Skeggs (2004) authorised their existence as valuable people through the practice of respectability that ushers upon them a respectable womanhood. Despite being conferred a pathological or deviant identity, these women from subordinate groups are 'the authors of their experience of femininity, without being symbolically authorised' (Skeggs, 2004: 25). Such a view of reflexivity challenges Giddens's (1991) and Beck's (1992) assumptions about the transformative potential of de-traditionalisation and individualisation.

Adkins (2004) calls for reflexivity to be viewed as a situated process ambivalently related to norms; not necessarily transformative, de-traditionalising or individualising, nor simply incorporating the social order. She says,

[R]eflexivity must therefore be understood to involve reflection on the un-thought and unconscious categories of thought, that is, the uncovering of un-thought categories of habit which are themselves corporealised pre-conditions of our more self-conscious practices (Adkins, 2004: 194).

Such a view of reflexivity helps to account for the diverse ways in which Muslim girls in my study negotiate the structural forces in their lives. They frequently reflected upon the identities conferred upon them on account of their class, ethnicity, religion, and gender positions. They also drew references from their personal and collective past, their current circumstances and their future aspirations to revalue their social location as gendered, classed, religious or ethnic minority subjects, and to consciously rethink taken-for-granted practices and values. Following insights from Skeggs (2004) and Adkins (2004), Muslim girls in my study are viewed as suffering actors with strong reflexive abilities. They are acutely aware of the multiple 'rules of engagement' at play, and continuously bid for authorisation as legitimate actors in the field of education using various parallel and often contradictory stories about self- as aspirational, as victimised, as patriotic, as modern, as respectable and so on, as my data indicates as elaborated in forthcoming Hussain (2019).

## **1.7. Conclusion**

The hybrid framework proposed in this paper combines diverse sociological and feminist scholarly traditions. It is attentive to the politics of knowledge production and contributes towards the project of decolonisation of knowledge through Third-world feminist appropriation Northern theories. This hybrid framework offers a non-identitarian approach to conceptualise Muslim women and girl's disadvantages as socio-economic and

cultural/symbolic at the same time. This approach also opens up the space for simultaneous discussion of overlapping injustices experienced by Muslim women and girls on account of their gender identity and their minority identity. Using feminist appropriations of Bourdieu's scholarship on politics of authorization, the hybrid framework is able to conceptualise how Muslim femininity is pathologised over time. It goes on to show that these pathological subjectivities are based on the location of subjects in the yardstick of the 'rules of engagement', namely: middle-class-ness, respectable femininity or good girlhood, and Hindu normativity. And finally the hybrid incorporates Third-world feminist considerations to rethink liberal feminist conception of agency. It warrants the conceptualisation of Muslim girls' agency as encompassing their 'reflexive' articulation of suffering, conformity, and resistance to the subjectivities conferred upon them.

The 'discursive trope of the oppressed Muslim woman/girl is quite malleable' and is transposed seamlessly from one socio-cultural context to another creating certain persistent ahistoric and undifferentiated storylines about the figure of the Muslim woman/girl (Khoja Moolji 2018: 23). As a feminist researcher, I have been frustrated and challenged by what seems to be an impossible task of dislodging this discursive troupe. In this context, the proposed hybrid framework addressed my situated concerns around conceptualising and representing Muslim femininity while destabilising the discursive troupe of the oppressed Muslim woman/girl. Though my own research was looking specifically at education of Muslim girls, the framework itself is much broader and lends itself to wider discussions around social justice, politics of authorisation and agency. These concepts are not limited to the field of education or to Muslim women and girls, or to India or the global South. Thus, the proposed hybrid framework can be deployed to think through various conundrums in conceptualising and representing gendered, minoritised subjects in ways that are accountable to their struggles for self-representation and self-determination

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