

Shifting identities of Bengali female
learners in ESOL: a post-
structuralist feminist exploration of
classed, 'raced' and gender
identities

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Abstract

This thesis explores the social construction of classed, 'raced' and gendered identities of Bengali female learners of ESOL (English for Speakers of other languages) from a post-structuralist feminist position. My research is conducted within the post-compulsory educational context, exploring how Bengali women construct identities in relation to educational experiences of learning English as a second language, and considering how Bengali women are positioned, in turn, by contemporary popular, academic and political discourses.

This study is intended to contribute to creating 'a third space', within which shifts in cultural meanings that occur through colonisation and diaspora, offer possibilities for reworking and resisting notions of passivity, inactivity and docility assigned to women within popular and some white academic discourses (Hall, 1992; Khan, 1998; Gilroy, 1992; Spivak, 1999). To open up spaces for non-hegemonic readings of Bengali femininities I identified discursive strategies actively employed by Bengali women to trouble/unsettle dominant discourses that reduce Bengali women to 'docile bodies' (Foucault, 1979).

Applying a feminist post-structuralist framework has illuminated differences and similarities between, and within, Bengali women's accounts of ESOL education, to substantiate the view that there is no one truth and no unitary subject. I also draw upon post-colonial, black feminist perspectives to argue that the voices from the margins that have traditionally been excluded from the knowledge making processes can bring into dispute the current discourses about 'race', class, gender, culture, religion, patriarchy and femininity.

The research was undertaken at two educational sites in East and central London over five years. In total, 20 Bengali female learners of ESOL participated in life history interviews over the period of 2 years. The sample was diverse in terms of age, class, education, employment, marital and maternal status. In addition, I also conducted one-to-one interviews with two members of teaching staff per institution.

I do not present my interpretations of Bengali female accounts of employment and education as 'truth' since post-structuralist approaches challenge the notion of singular truth for all South Asian women. Rather I present these accounts as alternative truths which expand and challenge deep-seated inequalities that position South Asian women as passive victims within existing, dominant oppressive discourses.

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Overview of chapters

This thesis is divided into 9 chapters. The **first chapter** is divided into two main sections. In the first section I review the literature that pathologises South Asian femininities and contributes to inactive constructions of Bengali women within ESOL policies as inactive. In the second section of the literature review chapter I argue that the post-Rushdie construction of Asian masculinities contribute to stereotypical notions of passive, controlled and oppressed Asian femininity (Ahmad, 2001; Archer, 2001; Shain 2000; 2003). Reviewing the resistance literature which offers a critique to a cultural pathology framework since it represents an alternative reading to the negatively represented discourse of South Asian femininities, I identify links with my study and outline the way in which the study aims to contribute to and extend the knowledge of South Asian femininities.

The **second** chapter sets out my methodological and epistemological positioning as well as the underpinning theoretical framework. This chapter is divided into three parts. While the first is concerned with more practical aspects of the study, the second part considers the methodological and ethical issues arising in cross-cultural research. In the final section of this chapter I consider the Foucauldian notion of power and reverse discourses and justify a post-structuralist analysis.

The **third** chapter sets out an overview of data chapters, reviewing the aims and objectives of the study. As the first data chapter, it focuses on Bengali women's previous experiences of learning

English and how this experience reproduces women's current positioning within the context of ESOL education. This chapter also highlights discursive practices employed by Bengali female learners that have the potential to dismantle the sense of 'otherness' conferred upon Bengali female learners by pervasive and hegemonic discourses. This chapter explores Bengali women's experiences of learning English in Bangladesh and the UK. Drawing upon the post-structuralist conceptualisation of identity as fluid and dynamic, this chapter charts different subject positions taken up by Bengali women in various social sites.

The **fourth** chapter explores the impact of hegemonic discourses upon construction of Bengali female learners and highlights the extent to which external agencies contribute to the process of marginalisation of South Asian femininities within the employability discourse. The analysis of the data provided in this chapter highlights discursive practices employed by Bengali female participants at both sites of research aimed at destabilising, transforming and resisting the low skilled structural positioning.

The **fifth** chapter explored teachers' construction of Bengali female learners within the ESOL educational context. Interviews with the staff explored the extent to which, if any, popular discourses on South Asian femininities impacted upon teacher's constructions of Bengali female learners.

The **seventh** chapter explores employment aspirations of Bengali women that bypass the male-female gender binaries underpinned by discourses of tradition, cultural and natural biological differences.

The **eight** chapter looks at the role of dress in the construction of Bengali women's identities and the extent to which fusing/alternating Asian and Western style of clothing enables Bengali women to construct alternative 'hybrid' identities.

The **final** chapter summarises my findings, considers the limitation of this research and proposes further research on Bengali female learners.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

Introduction

This study of Bengali female learners' experiences of ESOL education is concerned with the ways in which dominant popular representations of South Asian femininity circulating in a range of discourses are resisted and challenged. In particular, my study aims to open up new space within which an enduring passivity discourse could be disrupted in order to make a way for alternative and more emancipatory readings. As a feminist researcher I challenge and expose educational inequalities within the field of ESOL.

This chapter is organised into two main sections. Within the first section I review the UK literature that contributes to the construction of South Asian women as inactive within ESOL policies starting from colonial patriarchal and newer post-colonial discourses and expanding on to media and some white academic discourses. I argue that South Asian femininity is integrally linked with discourses of South Asian masculinity; specifically, the post-Rushdie construction of Asian masculinities which led to the term 'Asian' being conflated with 'Muslim' which has been connected to a range of negative images and stereotypes. In the final part of section 1 I argue that the post-Rushdie conceptualisation of Asian masculinity and the rise of Islamophobia contribute to stereotypical notions of passive, controlled and oppressed Asian femininity (Ahmad, 2001; Archer, 2001; Shain, 2000; 2003). Through deconstructing the category of 'South Asian woman' I set the ground for an intersectional approach to feminist analysis within which the heterogeneity of South Asian women's experiences of education can be accounted for.

The second section reviews the literature which offers a critique to a cultural pathology framework within which the Asian culture is blamed

for the problems experienced by Asian girls in relation to identity and schooling. Reviewing the resistance literature as an alternative reading to the negatively represented discourse of Asian girl as the repository of difference, I identify links with my study, which also aims to challenge the negative stereotypes of Bengali women and identify strategies employed by women in negotiating gender, class and cultural aspects of their identities. I explore studies in which an intersectional approach to analysis was adopted (Ahmad, 2003; Brah, 1992; 1996; Shain, 2003). In adopting a similar approach to my analysis I intend to bring to the forefront the complex social and political factors that affect ESOL learning experiences of female Bengali learners within the post-compulsory sector.

In the final section of the chapter I explore Norton's (1995; 1997; 2000) post-structuralist conceptualisation of identity which merges the ESOL learner with the language learning context. Within the current ESOL policy construction of female ESOL learners as 'inactive' this conceptualisation of identity challenges the notion that ESOL learners resist learning the language that would aid integration into the host community. Such accounts fail to recognise unequal relations of power between ESOL learners and native or near native speakers of English that limit the opportunities for ESOL learners to practise English outside the confines of the classroom environment. Taking into account relations of power, Norton shifts the onus of blame from the individual onto society within which female ESOL learners do not have 'power to impose the reception' (Bourdieu, 1977:75).

The focus of my study is on Bengali female learners of ESOL. However, I use the term 'South Asian women' to denote collective action which geographically refers to the people whose origins can be traced to India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. I employ this term

to draw upon the women's collective role in relation to areas such as education, family and employment. The collective term 'South Asian women' is a direct reference to collective action of South Asian women who unite across ethnicity, religion, caste, language and other differences to create support for women with broadly shared experience (Brah, 1992b; Puwar, 2007).

Differences within the category of South Asian woman have tended to be overlooked in favour of forming an overarching group solidarity and collective action. As Brah (1992: 58) argues 'difference is constructed differently within various discourses. These different meanings signal differing political strategies and outcomes.' Collective action by South Asian women can be traced to the development of the black feminist movement whereby the unitary notion of the category 'woman' was challenged by black feminists for ignoring the struggles and experiences of black women (Brewer, 1993; Collins, 2000; Mama, 1995; Mirza, 1992).

South Asian women challenge injustice and racism through campaigns, social and cultural activities, educational and training opportunities, thus aiming to build a broader agenda based on commonalities of experience of oppression and racism in contemporary Britain (Brah, 1992 b; Brah, 1993; Thiara, 2003). In organising campaigns South Asian women challenge their racialised and gendered identities and expose constructions of passivity circulating in a range of discourses. Thiara (2003:90) argues that the collective action by South Asian women contested not only remnants of patriarchal practice within the Asian family and communities but also the notion that such practices are direct effect of a 'backward culture'.

In drawing upon the term ‘South Asian woman’ my intention is to illuminate the way in which gendered and social relations, in combination with state policy on ESOL, determine women’s subjectivity and experience of learning ESOL within the further education sector. What underlies this approach is a disavowal of ‘European orientalist ideologies which construct Asian women as ‘passive’ (Brah, 1996: 65). Brah (1992) argues that within the contemporary racialised discourses South Asian women’s position is rooted in Britain’s colonialism and imperialism.

Situating my study within a post-structuralist framework I reject the notion of unitary South Asian female experience; to illuminate the complex and multidimensional nature of their knowledge and experience I argue that such complexity requires further deconstruction of the category ‘South Asian woman’ since it denotes a diverse and heterogeneous group of women differentiated in terms of geographical origin, national heritage, religion, caste and class.

Section 1

Construction of Bangladeshi learners within the dominant ESOL policy discourse

Drawing upon feminist post-structuralist perspectives I have so far taken into account the way in which South Asian femininities are socially and historically located. Within the first part of this chapter I explore the extent to which contemporary popular, academic and political discourses continue to represent South Asian women as the passive victims of the ‘backward cultural practices’ which serve to homogenise South Asian learners as passive, inactive recipients of knowledge. My study deconstructs dominant notions of South Asian learners by highlighting practices Bengali women in the Further

Education (FE) sector draw upon in order to produce counter discourses to challenge dominant assumptions and definitions.

In this section I look at representations of South Asian women within the dominant policy discourse and trace their origins to the colonial and newer postcolonial discourses (Hawley, 1994; Jayawardena, 1996; Mani, 1992; Mirza, 1997; Spivak, 1988; Simmonds, 1997; Parry, 1995; Patel, 1997). I contextualise reading ESOL policy within the historical specificity of Bengali women's oppression. Through the process of deconstruction of key policy documents, I argue that the passive imagery assigned to Bengali learners within the current ESOL policy is a reconstruction of colonial patriarchal discourses.

The current ESOL provision in the UK evolved from The Moser Report, *A Fresh Start* (1999) which reported that an estimated seven million adults in the UK had poor basic skills, including up to one million who 'struggled with English'. In the wake of the Moser Report, *Breaking the Language Barriers* was produced in 2000 by a group of ESOL practitioners who recognised that 'ESOL needs should be addressed alongside but distinct from basic literacy and numeracy'. Lack of fluency in English was identified as a 'very significant factor in poverty and under-achievement in many ethnic minority communities'. (DFEE, 2000:2).

Whilst the initial focus of ESOL provision was on integrating minority groups into society, Appleby and Bathmaker (2006) have noted that the current focus is on gaining employability skills. As Appleby and Bathmaker state Skills for Life strategy (Sfl) has been constructed as a response to:

the skills demands of a knowledge economy for global competitiveness than to issues of social inclusion and increased opportunities for lifelong learning. (206:703)

The employability focus of ESOL provision was fully endorsed by government in 2010 (BIS, 2010) which signalled cuts in funding for those groups of learners who were not on active job seeking benefits.

This employability focus of ESOL provision was also reflected in the funding opportunities. From September 2011 the main source of ESOL funding provision, Skills Funding Agency (SFA), cut funding to ESOL classes for those people who were deemed to be inactive in terms of job searching:

We will focus public funds for ESOL on active jobseekers (JSA or ESA WRAG) by fully funding formal training where English language skills form a barrier to finding work. (BIS, 2010:05)

The term 'inactive' was in reference to those people who were in receipt of inactive benefits—that is those on low incomes who rely on government help in the form of income support and working tax, pension and housing credits. Those most affected by the proposed cuts to funding were women. At the time it was estimated that '74% learners receiving inactive benefits are women' (AOC, 2011).

Dividing learners into categories of active and inactive has encountered some criticism by Action for ESOL, a group of ESOL managers, researchers, practitioners and learners. Lee, the 2011 Refugee Council's policy adviser for employment and training, argued this division of learners into active and inactive could be read as 'deserving and undeserving distinction' (migrantsrights.org.uk, 2011).

Drawing attention to the fact that the majority of ESOL learners are women in receipt of inactive benefit such as Income support, he considered the term inactive as deeply ‘insulting’ since women may choose to take part time work opportunities when their children start school. The roots of the deserving/ underserving distinction can be traced to the right-wing Labour MP Frank Field with responsibility for informing social policy. Field’s 2001’s proposal that tougher sanctions should be put in place for ‘undeserving’ job seekers locates blame within a neoliberal constructions of the individual subject. Such construction of an individual pathologises and others marginalised groups that fall outside normative construction of the ‘worthy citizen’ (Rose, 1999). According to Field the ‘undeserving’ are those who have never worked and therefore have not contributed to society, whereas ‘deserving’ are those who are ‘work ready’. Such a simplified binary distinction fails to account for the diverse learning needs of Bengali female learners – who find themselves trapped within the ‘undeserving/ inactive category’. Many Bengali female learners see ESOL classes as the main route towards gaining English language skills to enable them to find employment (Aston *et al.* 2007; Barnes *et al.* 2005).

Engaging in the process of deconstruction of key ESOL policies (BIS, 2010, 2011) here I want to explore the way in which Bengali female ESOL learners have been discursively positioned as ‘inactive’ within employability discourses. To gain critical understandings of Bengali women’s discursive positioning within the policies, I draw upon a post-structuralist feminist/Foucauldian approach. It is through Foucault’s (1972) notion of discourse that I can trace how ‘inactive’, and ‘deficient’ constructions are assigned to Bengali female learners within ESOL policies since it is through discourse that human subjects are constructed.

The hegemonic construction of ESOL learners in the policy discourses implies that they are deficient and lacking and therefore would benefit from very specific, largely employment-led skills (Cooke 2006; Cooke and Simpson 2009). Reporting on the language skills of minority linguistic groups the Moser report singled out the Bengali group as one of the most linguistically lacking groups since:

about one in four of the sample obtained a 'zero score', meaning that they could not:

- fill in their names and addresses
- understand a simple notice
- read their child's school timetable
- use a calendar even when given instructions in their own language (1999:4)

Within such homogenising discourses differences between Bengali learners are obscured: some Bengali ESOL learners are experts in at least one language and they bring life/work experiences as well as work/ professional identities. Within ESOL policy discourses ESOL learners in general are constructed as a monolithic category, in need of remedial education that would enable them to take up employment opportunities and therefore ease their transition from 'undeserving' to 'deserving' citizens. Such discourses are saturated with neo-liberal values since they place the onus on the individual to up skills themselves and fund their own courses (Rose, 1999): 'citizens must take greater responsibility for ensuring their own skill needs are met' (BIS, 2010:03).

What is implicit in this construction of ESOL learners is that those learners who are in receipt of job seeking benefits are deemed more 'worthy' of free ESOL classes than those who are in receipt of inactive

benefits (of which 74 % are female learners according to AoC 2011 report). The September 2011 focus of ESOL policy on the 'active' group of ESOL learners that can contribute to the needs of economy further marginalises the needs of female learners. Following Foucault (1980), here I want to argue that Bengali women have become constructed through an employability discourse as 'inactive'. Such an analysis alludes to Foucault's (1979) ideas of 'docile bodies that yield to the discourse'. This discursive positioning of Bengali women within ESOL policies operates within the system within which power is unequally distributed and society is structured in fundamentally opposing ways for different groups of people. The government and its agencies are in positions of power and cast a regulatory gaze upon subordinate groups to ensure that the hegemonic order is maintained. Foucault argues that discourses are productive of particular people, cultures and times. Discourses are influenced by and influence shifting patterns of power. Such discourses promote particular discursive truths to justify the need for remedial measures. Foucault (1980) refers to them as normalising discourses since they perpetuate knowledge previously constructed, legitimate order and increase the need for remedial actions of elite agencies. Normalising discourses serve to silence alternative discourses. Foucault's concept of reverse discourse implies that counter discourses can be set up. Despite being constructed as 'deficient'/'inactive', Bengali women can take up different subject positions and set up counter discourses. It is the aim of this study to explore counter discourses through Bengali women's narratives.

According to an ESOL Equality Impact Assessment Report 'poor English language is one of the biggest barriers to accessing work, to progress in employment or to fulfil their potential' (2011:15). Constructing South Asian ESOL learners as 'inactive' does not

correlate to the data provided by the report whereby Asian or Asian British account for approximately a third each (32.6% and 31.5%) of all female ESOL learners who accessed ESOL provision in 2009 (2011: 16).

Whilst the ESOL Equality Impact Assessment Report acknowledges that the cuts in ESOL funding may potentially have negative implications for women, it maintains that 'there is no data available to support the view that certain sub-groups of women cannot afford to pay for their learning' (2011:16). According to The Fawcett Society's report on austerity (2012) women are the most affected by austerity both in terms of employment and cuts to benefits and tax credits. The unemployment rate for women increased by 11, 88 per cent (Fawcett Society, 2013b). This is in addition to Fawcett's (2009) finding that 40 per cent of minority ethnic women live below the poverty line. Action for ESOL and the key stakeholders such as the Association of Colleges (AoC) and the National Institute for Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) launched campaigns to counteract the effects of cuts. In a Special Issue of *Feminist Review Journal* Brah *et al.* (2015) explore the extent to which neo-liberal policies of austerity are influenced by the racialised and gendered discourses. Such policies have exacerbated construction of minority ethnic women as 'non-desirable' citizens since the 2010 Coalition Government stresses that citizens must take responsibility to learn English with minimal government assistance (Lonergan, 2015).

There is research which suggests that many ESOL courses are at present 'too basic' for learners with high levels of education (Khanna *et al.* 1998), and that they do not yet provide the level of competence required by employers (Schellekens, 2001). ESOL learners are a heterogeneous group of learners (Baynham, 2006; Baynham & Roberts

et al. 2007; Grief *et al.* 2007; Vertovec, 2007). Many learners have high professional backgrounds and the largely instrumental purpose of ESOL training does not equip them to fully utilise their skills that stretch beyond menial jobs (Wallace, 2006; Cooke & Simpson, 2009). The language that professionals such as doctors and nurses need to regain employment in their professional field is not presented in ESOL classrooms even at the highest levels. The purpose of the training within the economically driven ESOL policy is to keep ESOL learners within the narrowly prescribed economic outcomes of the policy which will maintain the homogeneity of the existing social order (Cooke, 2006). Cooke argues that Skills for Life policy focuses on acquisition of skills that meet the needs of market rather than individual learners' needs. An individual's unwillingness to acquire the target language is constructed as his/her choice to participate in the market economy.

This reading of the policy, whereby women are objectified and represented as inactive, voiceless, stereotyped and passive recipients of the ESOL policy conjures Bangladeshi women's historically specific nature of class and cultural consciousness embedded in colonial patriarchal and newer postcolonial discourses (Hawley, 1994; Mani, 1992; Mirza, 1997; Spivak, 1988; Simmonds, 1997; Parry, 1995; Patel, 1997). In the next section I trace such representations of women to colonial discourses, starting with the controversial practice of *sati*.

Critical analysis of *sati*: paving the way for transformative action of South Asian women

In the previous section I have explored the characterisation of South Asian women within ESOL policy discourses. Now I am going to look at how these constructions can be traced to colonial patriarchal and newer patriarchal discourses. My study contributes to the view that

South Asian women are able to exercise agency and negotiate roles through various cultural practices. Here I explore the controversial practice of *sati* which makes way for the transformative construction of South Asian women, highlighting South Asian women's agency that has been suppressed in dominant hegemonic discourses. I draw on the practice of *sati* since it has come to symbolise the dualism inherent in the 'West and the Rest' argument (Said, 1979; Hall, 1997) whereby South Asian women embody difference between the barbaric East and the civilized West, inferiority and superiority, passivity and agency.

The concept of *sati*, which Hawley (1994: 12) defines as a good woman, refers to a truly faithful, dutiful wife whose identity is dependent upon and relational to her husband. By engaging in the practice of *sati* a Hindu woman follows her own husband in death (*anumarana*) to escape a fate of widowhood (Hawley 1994: 14). Within the official accounts Hindu women who engaged in *sati* practices were caught in dual representation; either portrayed as 'heroines able to withstand the raging blaze of the funeral pyre or else pathetic victims coerced against their will into flames' (Mani, 1992:162; Rajan,1993) However, such dual representation does not account for women who chose to undergo this practice from their own volition, thus paving the way for a third representation of women.

Spivak (1988) and Mani (1992) drew attention to the fact that the Other Eastern interpretation of *sati* practices as barbaric, uncivilised are embedded within Western discourses. Downtrodden images of South Asian women who need to be rescued from the realms of an oppressive culture have come to legitimate colonial domination. Spivak (1988:296) argues that the abolition of *sati* practices 'has been generally understood as a case of white men saving brown women from brown men'. Whilst these western accounts of *sati* depict a need

for a rescuer, they discount the agency of those women who volunteer or choose to die on their husband's funeral pyre (Spivak, 1988: 93). The role of Hindu women in Western accounts is equated by Spivak to that of a subaltern – a term ascribed to gender and cast that is attributed to being subordinate within the South Asian society. As subaltern a Hindu woman is silenced, and, an account of what she thinks or believes is assigned to her within Western terms to justify imperialism as a civilising mission.

Spivak's deployment of the term 'subaltern' subsumes that South Asian women's voices have been rearticulated by the dominant Western discourse which serves the needs of those in the position of power. Thus any voice that may be given to South Asian women is disfigured by hegemonic discourses. Spatially defining subaltern as being outside the hegemonic discourses, the subaltern occupies a space of difference. Spivak's studies of subalternity have encountered some critique by Parry (1987) as they do not account for any attempts of resistance to hegemonic colonial discourses and subalternity itself represents 'a deliberated deafness to the native voice where it is to be heard'(1987:39).

However, my reading of Spivak's deployment of the term is not the subaltern's physical inability to speak but the fact that what the subaltern says is couched within the hegemonic discourse and anything that may discord this discourse is rearticulated to fit within the dominant discourse. Thus while some women may have consciously chosen to perform the act of *sati* that volition has been left out of the dominant discourse as it does not serve the needs of the coloniser. In gaining direct accounts of Bengali female learners of ESOL education my research explores the way in which Bengali

learners represent themselves and the ways in which they resist and challenge dominant popular representations of passivity.

It is South Asian women's agency and volition to undergo *sati* willingly that is of particular interest for my study as it breaks away from the dual representation of South Asian women as victims or heroines to include a possibility of a 'female subjectivity that is shifting, contradictory, inconsistent' (Rajan, 1993:11). My study of Bengali women studying ESOL aims to transcend the binary representations of *sati* women as either victims or heroines and highlight their agency in resisting, transforming and unsettling dominant discourses. Within the hegemonic ESOL provision the diverse needs of South Asian women are suppressed with the one-size fits all approach to education. Women are presented as subaltern within the instrumental aims of ESOL education. However, in seeking women's accounts of ESOL study I seek to identify the strategies women employ to resist the passive imagery and highlight women's agency in adapting the provision to suit their educational and employment needs.

It can be argued that within colonial patriarchal discourses Asian women have been denied the privilege to speak and have valid identities of their own. Western accounts of the practice of *sati* pathologise South Asian women as voiceless victims of a backward barbaric culture who are in need of 'saving' by the enlightened 'West' (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Brah, 1992; Zahedi, 2011). Patriarchal discourses play a key role in assigning a passive role to Bangladeshi women. As passive, subservient, dependent wives walking three steps behind a husband South Asian women are characterised as victims and bearers of an oppressive culture (Shain, 2003) or what are perceived to be the good family values of their 'culture' (Rattansi, 1992; 1994).

Such representations of South Asian women are couched within the cultural pathology framework which homogenises South Asian communities. The wide heterogeneity of South Asian women in terms of religious, linguistic and caste patterns which impacts upon their culture is not acknowledged with these accounts (Brah, 1992; Shain, 2000; 2003). With its sole focus on culture it distracts from wider social, economic and political factors which account for the oppression of South Asian women. This is the framework within which I situate my study taking into account wide heterogeneity of South Asian women's experiences within ESOL education.

In this section the representation of South Asian women as inactive recipients of ESOL policy is traced back to colonial patriarchal discourses where these women are pathologised as passive, ruthlessly oppressed by their men. The next section explores other discourses within which the victim status of South Asian women is further reproduced. In Western discourses these accounts oscillate between an exotic/erotic sexual being and the passive, downtrodden victims of culture (Abu Lughod, 2002; Puwar, 2000; Zahedi, 2001).

Representation of South Asian men within media discourses

South Asian women are also reproduced in a reductive framework within media discourses. Recent world events such as the highly publicized Rushdie Affair of 1988 and the more recent British and American government's declaration of the 'war on terror' after September 11 2001 has led to increased interest in South Asian women. Here I draw on the publication of Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* (1988) and its subsequent public demonisation of Muslim groups which became known in popular discourses as the 'Rushdie Affair'. Taking into account that Asian femininities are defined in opposition to Asian

masculinities (Archer, 2003; Ramji, 2007), the focus of this section is on Asian masculinities. Here I will contextualise the representations of Asian masculinities within Islamophobic discourses. A number of events such as the Rushdie Affair, the Gulf War and 9/11 have been exaggerated in the media to reinforce stereotypes of Asian men as Islamic terrorists and Muslim fundamentalists which strengthen social divisions (Archer, 2003; Ramji, 2003; Shain, 2000).

Since the publication of *The Satanic Verses* by British/Indian author Salman Rushdie there has been a marked increase in 'Islamophobia' that has led to a change in the dominant public perception and stereotype of the British Asian community (Alexander, 2000; Archer, 2003; Ramji, 2003; Shain, 2000). Muslim young men have been constructed as 'ultimate Others' (Phoenix, 1997). The post-Rushdie conceptualisation of Asian identity is conceptualised within the new Muslim /non-Muslim dichotomy where the term Asian has become conflated with Muslim. Culturally and geographically diverse Asian groups have now been primarily defined under the overarching umbrella of the Muslim religion (Saghal & Yuval-Davis, 1992).

Anti-Muslim sentiment by way of Islamophobia led to the positioning of young Muslim men as 'suicide bomber', 'jihadist fanatic', 'fundamentalist preacher' or 'demonic terrorist' (Nayak, 2009). The pre-Rushdie academic conceptualisation of Asian masculinities was couched within the culturist perspective whereby second generation young Asian masculinities were caught between two homogenous cultures, 'Asian' and 'British Asian' (Rattansi, 1992:19; Alexander, 2000). Within such accounts young Asian men have been associated with the notion of 'identity crisis' leading to 'confused and culturally ambiguous' representations (Hiro, 1991:151). Against such unproblematised accounts of two distinct homogenous cultures

charges of essentialism have been leveled by feminist researchers (Yuval-Davis, 1994:185). Static and ahistorical representations of culture and communities have been underpinned by the normative assumptions that privilege the mainstream culture.

The perception of homogeneity of British Muslim culture has been further evoked in the wake of the Gulf War in 1991 which reinscribed the positioning of Asian men as 'the other' and the deviant (Alexander, 2000). What it meant to be a British Muslim was inevitably defined in terms of negativity and deprivation. Alexander's study (2000:9) challenges the cultural pathological representations of young Asian men who were represented as 'caught between an oppressive and rigid parental culture at home and ghettoised subculture of poverty'. Alexander's account of masculine subjectivities opens up new spaces that celebrate the complex, diverse and flexible nature of identity. In providing a more fluid approach to Asian youth identities Alexander challenges the essentialist approaches to culture and identity as fixed and static in presenting an account of masculine subjectivities that make visible the contradiction of the pathologised black masculinities.

The post-Rushdie conceptualisation of Asian identity within the media portrayed young Asian men as carriers of a 'backward culture': they were constructed as a new 'threat to British society (Alexander, 2000: 243). Pathologisation of Asian youth against the backdrop of *The Satanic Verses* marked a shift in the public perception of Asian communities from passive victims to active perpetrators. Asian women were represented as the most visible symbol of the backwardness of culture struggling in the face of progressive Western values.

Alexander (2000) writes that Muslim young men have come to embody 'the new folk devils' within media discourses. This shift from 'victim' to 'aggressor' in the perception of Asian masculinities acts to homogenise all Asian men as violent and problematic. This systematic identification with violence situates Asian masculinities in oppositional relation to dominant white society. Macey (1999) argues that this assertion of aggressive Asian masculinity has cultural implications as it is targeted at the oppression of Asian women. This newly found 'Islamic' identity of Asian men serves to promote racial exclusion and gender hostility. It is evoked to justify Asian men's violent behaviour towards Asian women (Macey, 1999: 852). Two events have led to the reification of Islam as the main marker of difference: The Rushdie Affair of 1988 and the Gulf War of 1991.

Since the 7/7 2005 attacks in London there has been a significant rise in the sensational and Islamophobic reporting by the press.

Hegemonic representation of British Asian men as 'outsiders' is captured through the sensational use of the language peppered with words and phrases such as 'fanatic', 'threat', 'terrorists' and 'suicide bombers'. The 25/10/11 issue of the Sun newspaper featured a front page story where Muslims are constructed as a figure of threat that belongs outside the national narrative. Under the headline 'Talibans Xmas UK terror bid' it was reported that the Taliban was planning a campaign of Christmas 'carnage' across cities in Britain. Describing the perpetrators as 'liberal looking', 'not bearded or veiled', the underlying implication was that any Muslim, even the British Muslim, can pose a threat to Britain.

A climate of fear and violence towards Muslim communities in Britain is currently being promoted by the EDL (The English Defence League) – the 'human rights organisation' that emerged from Luton football

gangs. EDL propagate stereotypes of British Asian men as radicals, extremists and terrorists. The murder of Lee Rigby in May 2013 by Muslim converts was further amplified by media to reignite Anti-Islamic feelings. The Telegraph article of 1 June 2013 under the title 'The truth about the 'wave of attacks on Muslims' after Woolwich murder' reported that 'a presenter on Radio 4's influential Today programme stated that attacks on Muslims were now 'on a very serious scale'. However, Mughal Fiyaz, the manager of a government funded project *Tell Mama* (Measuring Anti-Muslim Attacks), pointed out that the extent of these attacks was exaggerated in the media since the majority of those incidences related to offensive messages reported on social media.

At the center of the EDL campaign is the demonisation of Islam which is locked in the binary representation with the 'enlightened' West. Within this binary representation Muslims occupy the 'enemy' role since EDL campaigns aim to construct Muslim men as backwards, primitive and excessively religious. EDL's mission statement warns of the barbaric practices amongst small but significant number of Asian men that include degradation of women, molestation of young children and perpetration of terrorist activities (EDL website).

In this section I have considered popular stereotypes currently prevalent regarding Asian masculinities. Against the backdrop of the Rushdie Affair and the Gulf War the correlation is made between young men's religious identity and problematic status accorded to them (Alexander, 2000). Differences between and within Asian communities have, as a result, been obscured and religion has become a primary identifier. The Rushdie Affair had a major impact upon the racialisation of religion. The positioning of Asian men as 'other' only

serves to highlight the 'depravity' of Asian culture which stands in oppositional relation to the enlightened West.

Such a culturist perspective fails to take account of wider societal and economic factors that affect the lives of Asian men on a micro level. Moreover, it homogenises Asian communities by failing to acknowledge differences within and between Asian communities. In the next section I explore how such culturist conceptualisation of Asian men relates to conceptualisation of South Asian women's identity.

Death by culture: victim discourse

In relation to South Asian men South Asian women have come to occupy conflicting positions as both exotic and sensual and as meek, passive and tradition bound victims of their patriarchal cultures (Parmar, 1984; Ahmad, 2003; Ramji, 2003). In the 1990s the birth of the 'Asian babe' played upon South Asian women's image of 'sexually erotic creatures'. Shain (2003) argues that the term 'Asian babe' became synonymous with the images of Asian women as featured in pornographic films and photographic images of 'Asian Babes' magazines.

Asian femininities are highly visible in relation to the cultural pathology framework where themes such as arranged marriages, domineering fathers and cultural practices cast them into passive roles (Mirza, 2013). British press reporting of any such cultural themes is reduced to cultural stereotyping, focusing on the barbarity of an individual's family. What is problematic with such over-sensationalised reporting in the media is that such practices are constructed as an effect of the 'other's' barbaric customs and culture. One such violent

gendered cultural practice is honour killing whereby a young woman's sexuality is controlled by the family. The young woman's purity defines the status of the family within the community. As acts of violence honour killings are perpetrated upon the women who have betrayed the family's *izzat* (honour). Meeto & Mirza (2007) argue that such reporting contributes to the view that South Asian women are seen to suffer 'death by culture'.

Mirza (2007) argues honour killings have come to be seen as ethnicised phenomena (i.e. culturally specific honour crimes) and not as acts of domestic violence that can be traced to cultural and religious practices. On 19 September 2013 in the Daily Mail an honour killing is reported under the sensational heading 'Indian woman, 20, tortured and lynched by her family and her boyfriend beheaded in horrific honour killing'. In addition to the sensationalist heading, gruesome pictures of one of the two honour killings victims covered by a sheet are accompanied by voyeuristic comments of Daily Mail online readers of 'how dreadful and backward such practices are'.

Mohanty (1988) argues that such sensationalist reporting of honour killings perpetuates the stereotypes of Asian women as passive victims of culture devoid of any agency. Such killings are not contextualised within the wider social and economic framework. Mohanty accuses the West of 'latent ethnocentrism' since the way in which gender, power and patriarchy interact and contribute to voiceless and inactive representations of women is not acknowledged in the sensationalist reporting.

Asian women's representation in media discourses mobilises the perceived barbarity of oppressive male Asian culture thus invoking the cultural pathology framework. Asian femininities are positioned as

troubled and 'mixed up' because of the double oppression of 'race' and 'gender' (Sharma & Jones, 1997). Brah (1993) argues that the way in which axes of differentiation such as race, class and gender interact with one another in non-hierarchical ways contribute to the construction of South Asian woman as 'the bearer of races and cultures that are constructed as inherently threatening to the presumed superiority of western civilisation' (Brah, 1993: 447-8). What contributes to this victimology discourse is the application of Western concepts to non-Western groups whereby a Eurocentric model of femininity is presented as the norm against which non-western groups are judged as deviant (Lazreg, 1988; Mohanty, 1988; Ramji, 2003). Honour killings are considered to be an after effect of the 'other's' barbaric culture and practices even though the use of violence to 'regulate' women's behaviour cannot be isolated to one culture, religious group or minority (Mirza, 2007). When Western Women are subjected to culturally specific forms of patriarchal violence (i.e. gun crime or domestic violence), there is no specific reference to culture to account for such crimes. Domestic violence is not limited to a particular race, class, religion or age (Mirza & Meeto, 2013).

Moving beyond the victim pathology whereby culture is perceived as the main source of oppression Ahmad (2003), Alexander (2000), Archer (2001; 2002a; b), Brah (1996) and Shain (2003) challenge essentialist approaches to culture and identity as fixed and static within which the conceptualisation of 'Asian-ness' and 'British-ness' are represented as independent, homogenous categories. In an effort to conceptualise diverse identities many recent conceptualisations of identity employ the notion of hybridity (Puwar, 2003: 31-36), with reference to second and third generation South Asian women. My study on educational experiences of Bengali women within the further

education sector aims to contribute to hybrid conceptualisations of identity and challenge any notions of identity as static or fixed in time and place.

Islamophobic discourses: 'pathologised presence' of South Asian women

South Asian women's visibility has risen within current Islamophobic discourses where Islamic extremism has been constructed as a global threat to national security and women wearing the veil have come to embody the enemy 'within'. Mirza (2007) writes that the research on ethnic minority women has been characterised through the 'normalised absence/pathologised presence' approach. What underlines this characterisation is that ethnicised women are left out of any discussion on mainstream gender and race but instead become highly visible in particular contexts: the veil wearing practice being one of them.

The terrorist attacks of 11th September 2001 and the 2005 7/7 London bombings awoke further interest in the British Muslim community reigniting fears of 'Islamic terrorism, 'fundamentalism', 'the enemy within' and the 'clash of civilizations' (Ahmad, 2003: 47). Muslim women wearing the veil have come under the media spotlight (Meetoo & Mirza, 2013) as they came to symbolically embody the enemy 'within' (Jiwani, 2006; Razack, 2008; Razack, Smith, & Thobani, 2010). Muslim women wearing the veil have come to symbolise incompatibility of multiculturalism and specific cultural practices. Veil wearing practices have been constructed within popular discourses as the 'barbaric Muslim other' (Meetoo & Mirza 2013).

Ahmad (2003) argues that the figure of the veiled Muslim woman makes her stand out as non-assimilated. The veil wearing is perceived as an open refusal to integrate within the multicultural

society. The veiled Muslim woman is constructed in the public consciousness within the discourse of fear. Ahmad writes that:

Fear operates as an affective economy of truth. Fear slides between signs and sticks to some bodies and not others. For example, the judgement that someone 'could be' a terrorist draws on past and affective associations that stick various signs (such as Muslim, fundamentalist, terrorist) together. At the same time, fear is reproduced precisely by the threat that such bodies 'may pass (us) by. (2003: 377)

Constructions of Muslim bodies as fearsome pose a potential threat to security. It also induces feelings of rejection and anxiety amongst the majority of 'White other' and paves the way for a benign type of surveillance, thus counteracting the key values of the multicultural nation such as freedom and culture. Foucault (1979) argues that when certain groups are constructed as problematic within public and policy discourses they are placed under professional observation and policy regulation.

It is the construction of Bengali women within the current ESOL policy that is my concern within this study. Bengali women's experiences of education are lived through Islamophobic discourses that have heightened women's visibility in education. Within the Islamophobic discourse the veil wearing practice is a visible reminder of women's cultural oppression. Such a view discounts the possibility that some women may choose to wear the veil. In gaining Bengali women's views of ESOL education I focus on strategies Bengali female learners employ to resist negative stereotyping. Within the narrowly prescribed instrumental focus of ESOL education Bengali women are constructed

as passive recipients of education. Thus an analogy can be drawn between women's presumed cultural and educational passivity.

My study aims to challenge any claims to essentialised notions of ethnicity, traditionalism and religion. The problematic representation of the Muslim women wearing the veil as the 'enemy within' conflates all the South Asian women under the same category since no distinctions are made between ethnic and/or religious differences (Bhumji, 2008). To account for the full diversity of South Asian women's experiences any essentialised notions of ethnicity, traditionalism and religion are to be abandoned. Hence, there is no homogenous category of South Asian woman that can represent the experiences of widely heterogeneous groups of women who identify themselves as Muslim. What signifies the heterogeneity of Muslim women are diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, political views and beliefs. To claim that there is a unitary category of Muslim woman I would be conforming to the essentialised notions of culture, ethnicity and religion within the cultural pathology framework which my study aims to challenge and unsettle.

In media discourses Muslim women are constructed as victims of Islam typified by Cherie Blair's labelling of the 'burqa' as a 'symbol of women's oppression' (Ahmad, 2003:48). Ahmad (2003) argues that in symbolising the burqa with oppression Blair alienated herself from British Muslim women's groups. Blair did not fully take into account the reductionist nature of the discourse she was engaging in by equating *burqa* on – oppression, *burqa off* – liberation (Dejevsky, 2001). It also had the effect of exacerbating Islamophobia and fear of the 'other'. Women wearing the veil have come to symbolise the battle against Islam (Dwyer, 1999). Within the Islamophobia discourse the

wearing has been further constructed as the 'other's' barbaric customs and cultures (Said, 1985).

My study aims to challenge the stereotypical readings of Asian culture amplified within the media where women are constructed as victims of their perceived 'barbaric' and 'backward' culture and religious practices. Bypassing the reductionist binary readings of the *burqa* wearing practice my study will examine the extent to which *burqa* wearing can symbolise freedom, choice and empowerment.

Within this section I have traced the representation of South Asian women within a set of reductive discourses from academic to media whereby South Asian women are presented as shy, docile, passive victims of traditional customs and practices (Brah, 1992). Within patriarchal discourses South Asian women are presented as objects of male ownership. The construction of Asian women as passive is reproduced in some white and black feminist academic writing. Even those texts that seemingly challenge stereotypes of passivity inadvertently reproduce it by benignly insisting upon the maintenance of a tradition -modern dichotomy (Bhopal, 1997a, b;1998). Against the media furore of 9/11, the London bombings and the emergence of Islamophobia they have come to embody the 'enemy within'. Within the ensuing discourses of fear and anxiety female Muslim bodies have been perceived as fearsome and a threat to the national security (Ahmed, 2003). Muslim women's clothing has become synonymous with essentialist notions of ethnicity, traditionalism and religion. Moreover, women's decision to wear a veil has been recalled as a weapon by a number of competing parties to substantiate their argument against/for assimilation, multiculturalism, secularism and human rights (Coene & Longman, 2008; Killian, 2003; Scott, 2007).

Within the current Islamophobic discourse where the veil wearing has become a symbol of 'oppression' and 'backwardness' of Asian culture my study aims to unsettle the essentialised notions of culture, ethnicity and religion. Drawing upon the hybrid notion of identity it looks at how Bengali women position themselves within the wider discourses within which women are accorded the passive role. Exploring Bengali women's' experiences of ESOL education my study aims to uncover strategies women adopt in order to resist the passive imagery assigned to South Asian women in popular discourses of which Islamophobia is the most prevalent.

Conceptualising identity: invisibility and pathology of Asian identities

Drawing upon the notion of hybrid identity here I argue that the category of South Asian women cannot be represented within a single monolithic term. The heterogeneity of South Asian women needs to be accounted for in terms of origin, region, language, religion, caste, sexuality, age, marital status, occupational and educational background and current residence (Brah, 1992; Ramji, 2000; Shain, 2000; 2003). In terms of religion South Asian women can be practising Islam, Hinduism and Sikhism. They may be speaking some of the five major languages: Punjabi, Gujarati, Bengali, Urdu or Hindi. There are multitudes of castes (Shah, 1992; Taylor, 1985).

The diversity and fluidity of South Asian women's experiences can only be fully accounted for if various axes of differentiation namely those of class, race and gender are seen as interrelated categories (Brah & Minhas, 1985; Parmar, 1988; Shain, 2000; 2003).

Intersectionality as a categorical approach can be seen as a new way of understanding how modes of differentiation place groups of men and women into varying positions of dominance or subordination in the

wider society (Crenshaw, 1989; 1991). These modes of differentiation must be perceived as interrelated in complex ways as they are determined by instantaneous fusion of economic, political and ideological structures of the 21st century Britain that account for the subordination of black groups in Britain (Parmar, 1988).

Intersectionality has its origins in the work of black feminists and organisations such as the Combahee River Collective, the black feminist organisation from Boston and works of bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Angela Davis and Audre Lorde who were concerned with decentring the normative subject of feminism which is inherently white. As early as 1977 they encouraged critical and reflexive thinking about the interconnection of race, gender and class. Black feminists argue that racism needs to be acknowledged as a structuring feature of black women's relationship with white women (Carby, 1982; 1997; Collins, 2000).

hooks (1991:150) argues that in their space on the margins black women can create 'other ways of knowing' which resist, subvert and rename dominant ideology. 'Marginality is a central location for the production of a counter hegemonic discourse... it is an inclusive place where we recover ourselves, where we move in solidarity to erase the category coloniser/colonised' (hooks, 1992: 149-150). hooks advocates that place on the margins can be a radical place. Black women can invoke their agency and challenge the stereotypical images of black women as passive victims by theorising from 'a place of pain which enable us to remember and recover ourselves' (hooks 1994: 74). hooks argues that such place of pain is experienced by all who have come across some form of discrimination. hooks advocates that active engagement in collective struggle can challenge

any experiences of subordination and forge an all-inclusive feminist way forward.

Despite diversity between black women, black feminists advocate a discourse of global connections that is rooted in black women's experiences of discrimination and disadvantage in the workplace on the basis of their subjugated race, class and gender status in society (Amos and Parmar, 1984; Carby, 1982; Charles, 1997; Ifekwunigwe, 1997; Mirza, 1997). Through the mobilisation of black feminism South Asian women were able to invoke their agency and speak of their difference. In giving an account of their experiences or retelling their story black British feminists challenged normative racialised, gendered and classed discourses. Black women's experience had been rendered invisible in racial discourse where the normative subject is white, in gendered discourse where the subject is male and in the class discourse where race is not recognised (Mirza, 1997). Black women's negation from the normative discourses and the negation of agency is an instance of 'epistemic violence' (Spivak, 1988).

Following the work of these black feminists allows for the deconstruction of the category 'South Asian woman' and acknowledges the heterogeneity of experiences. Any claims made in support of culturally homogenous, racially purified identities are taken apart. Emergent identities are fluid, relational and consistently in the process of challenging, questioning and fracturing hegemonic meanings which have assigned them a role of passive victims (Brah & Minhas, 1985; Parmar, 1990; Rutherford, 1990; Shain, 2000; 2003). They are consistently repositioning themselves in relation to normative discourses which act to suppress their agency and make them invisible. In Brah's words:

Identity is never a fixed core, but on the other hand changing identities do assume specific concrete patterns as in a kaleidoscope against particular sets of historical and social circumstances. (1992:142-3)

Shain (2000; 2003) argues that Muslim women may choose to declare themselves in relation to their race, their religion or their ethnicity. Against the backdrop of colonialism and imperialism the experiences of Asian girls in schools can only be fully accounted for if the view is taken that black women are simultaneously subjected to triple oppressions of class, race and gender (Brah & Minhas, 1985:14-15).

In this section I reviewed the genesis of intersectional approaches to feminist analysis within which the full diversity and fluidity of South Asian women's experiences of education can be accounted for. This review of literature indicates that the stereotypical images of South Asian women are rooted in the colonial past. Even though underlying structures may limit Asian women's experiences of education, it is possible to adopt different strategies to resist and challenge dominant cultural definitions and create/negotiate different identities.

Within the field of ESOL where Bengali women have been assigned an inactive category due to low levels of economic participation I want to identify strategies Bengali women adopt to maximise educational opportunities. I set out to challenge misconceptions of Bengali women as inactive recipients of ESOL policies by presenting a set of alternative accounts constructed by Bengali participants of ESOL education in the further education sector. Making use of intersectionality within which wider discourses of gender, race and class simultaneously interact I explore a range of Bengali femininities

as they are managed and performed by women themselves against the backdrop of wider social and historical circumstances.

Section 2

Review of resistance literature

In this second section I review a body of literature that has led to alternative interpretations of Asian girls' responses to schooling.

My study aligns itself with a feminist post-structuralist approach to culture and identity. It draws upon the body of 'resistance' literature, the term coined in response to resistant strategies of specific groups of pupils to their marginalised positions in schools. Drawing upon the seminal work of Willis (1977) which investigated the resistance strategies of working class white males, the concept of 'resistance' was utilised by feminist researchers to suggest that young women strategically employ different forms of resistance within the classroom (McRobbie, 1978; Anyon, 1983; Davies, 1983).

My study draws upon this body of literature to challenge the essentialist approach to culture and identity as fixed and static. Instead it focuses on the fluidity of culture and identity in order to capture the diversity of South Asian women's experiences in education. It challenges the homogenising approach to the notions of black identity as race here is not perceived as a primary focus of identity as it may be within the cultural pathology framework. Instead it traces how race is fused with other categories such as class, gender, religion and language to recognise the full diversity of South Asian female subjectivities.

In providing an alternative reading to the common media representation of South Asian women as passive recipients of culture, language and education, my study aims to identify the strategies employed by women in negotiating gender, class and cultural aspects of their identities.

The roots of resistance literature can be traced back to Sharp's (1976) study which explored the strategies employed by Asian girls to resist stereotypes of submissiveness. However, Sharp's finding that Asian girls engaged in relationships with the opposite sex and ignored their parents is resonant of the culturalists' perspectives where greater freedom is associated with Western culture. However, Sharp's study is nonetheless significant in that it breaks away from the passive imagery of Asian girls.

The main challenge to a culturalist perspective was levelled by black feminists who drew on the wider social and historical process to counteract negative stereotyping of Asian girls in schools (Amos & Pamar, 1981; Parmar & Mirza, 1983; Brah & Minhas, 1985). In their research they brought to the fore some strategies Asian girls adopted in order to combat racism such as promoting positive notions of Asian identity through friendship circles.

Amos & Parmar (1981) lament ahistorical and essentialist approaches which focus on culture to account for the passive status accorded to Asian girls rather than inherently oppressive ideological structures of the society in which Asian girls live. With its focus on culturally specific themes such as arranged marriages such approaches obscure Britain's colonial past that impacts upon Asian girls' experiences of education. Bringing to attention the oppression the Asian girls can face in educational institutions primarily because of their race, Amos &

Parmar set Asian girls' experiences within a wider social and historical framework, thus merging the macro level of British colonial past with the micro level of Asian girls' contemporary education.

Brah & Minhas (1985) agree with Amos & Parmar (1981) that educational experiences of Asian groups are rooted in Britain's colonialist and imperialist past. They explored the way in which Asian girls were constructed by white British pupils and teachers. Unlike white British girls their ethnic background has assigned them a role of the sexual 'other' and subjected them to stereotypes of being 'smelly' and 'ugly', 'oily haired', wearing baggy trousers' or 'Pakis' (Brah & Minhas 1985: 20). This was in addition to other common stereotyping of Asian girls as the 'exotic oriental mystics'. This behaviour was not challenged by school teachers who shared the belief that Asian girls had an 'inability to stand up for themselves' (Brah & Minhas, 1985: 20). Hence, teachers also categorised Asian girls as passive victims of culture, a view shared by essentialists. The stereotyping of Asian girls in reductive terms alludes to the popular media discourses on South Asian women where South Asian women are represented as either exotic/erotic sexual beings or downtrodden victims of culture (Abu Lughod, 2002; Puwar, 2000; Zahedi, 2011).

Brah & Minhas (1985: 23) also explored the content of the curriculum which they perceived to be 'eurocentric, explicitly and implicitly racist and sexist and biased against the working class'. Those Asian girls for whom English was a second language received an even more restricted curriculum which further disadvantaged their future career prospects. Even more able Asian girls were discouraged by teachers and career advisors from taking certain subjects which were perceived as too academic. Thus even the use of curriculum implicitly

serves the demand of the dominant society where the position of Asian women as subordinates is reinforced.

The eurocentric nature of ESOL core curriculum

Brah & Minhas's reading of the curriculum as eurocentric can be aligned with the instrumental focus of Adult ESOL curriculum.

Research has suggested that it is premised on a model of deficiency (Cooke & Simpson, 2009) i.e. on what learners cannot do. Taking into account the wide heterogeneity of Bengali female learners, it is debatable if the narrowly prescribed curriculum can take into account the needs of Bengali female learners of ESOL whose aspirations extend beyond menial jobs. Thus even the Adult ESOL curriculum can be read as a tool utilised by dominant groups to keep marginalised groups in narrowly prescribed jobs.

Nearly 30 years ago Brah & Minhas (1985) highlighted the active role Asian girls adopt in their efforts to subvert the racism they experienced at school by adopting a range of strategies such as forming an all Asian friendship groups to resist racism and speaking in their own language. Brah & Minhas's (1985) study presents a significant point of departure since it highlights the agency of Asian girls.

My study aims to draw upon and extend this literature by disrupting and unsettling the misconceptions of South Asian women as passive. It aims to highlight some of the strategies Bengali learners adopt in their efforts to subvert Eurocentric nature of the ESOL core curriculum that fails to take into account educational and employment needs. In line with Brah & Minhas's study I will also look at how teachers construct ESOL Bengali learners.

Even though resistance literature represented a significant departure from the essentialist and ahistorical accounts produced within the Asian pathology framework, it had a little impact on the wider literature (Amos & Parmar, 1981). The primary focus of resistance literature on a positive Asian identity did not fully capture internal divisions within the Asian category.

Identity formation literature in the 1990s

Subsequent literature on Asian girls in the 1990s solely focused on religious subgroups and the extent to which religion contributes to positive identity formation. Significant research was carried out with Muslims (Brah, 1993a; Knott & Khoker, 1993; Haw, 1994; Basit, 1997a; 1997b) and Sikhs (Bhachu, 1991; Drury, 1991). Drury (1991) in her account of the distinctive nature of Sikh culture examines the way in which Sikh girls chose to either uphold or adapt Sikh traditions. Her study represents an alternative reading to pathological accounts of Asian culture as parents fully supported their daughters' attempts to leave behind some traditions. The most significant contribution of this study is that an alternative reading of culture is represented directly in opposition to the cultural pathology framework. Culture is capable of change and not static as advocated by the cultural perspective or ethnicity school. However, the study does not locate Sikh culture within the economic, social and historic context of imperialism and colonialism which contribute to marginalisation in Britain. It also assumes homogeneity within the religious groups i.e. that there is a Sikh culture.

These studies highlight the role of religion in the creation of positive identities. They challenge the dominant assumption that Islam

subjugates women and prevents them from taking further educational opportunities. Moreover, they oppose ethnicity school's views that religion oppresses women. My study draws upon a critical feminist intersectional framework in order to gain an understanding of the ways in which racism, patriarchy, religion and other systems of oppression impact upon Bengali women's experiences of education. It distances itself from the sustained focus on Islam as the primary definer of self-identity as such a focus would serve to disavow the gendered, structural and racial positioning of Muslim communities. Within the Islamophobic discourse religion and women wearing the veil are presented in a negative way. Exploring the intersections between religion, gender, race and class my study looks at how religion is mobilised in the construction of identity.

Brah's (1993) study develops an analytical framework for understanding the racialised gendering of labour markets. Setting accounts of individual young Muslim women of Pakistani origin within the complex social and historical processes that determine experiences of Asian Muslims Brah highlights the significance of an intersectional approach to analysis whereby the intersections between gender, class, ethnicity, racism, religion and other axes of differentiations are not mechanically added or reduced to one another.

Basit (1997b) gives an account of unintentionally prejudiced beliefs held by some teachers which show inadvertent racism towards British Muslim girls. Alluding to the greater freedom experienced by British white girls at home teachers believe that British Muslim and Sikh girls at school face greater restriction at home than their white counterparts. However, there is no in-depth investigation as to how teachers came to acquire these beliefs. No attempt is made to trace these assumptions about Muslim women to representations of Asian

culture as 'backward or barbaric' nor is it contextualised within wider political, historical and economic frameworks. Instead the study advocates that better modes of communication should be established between both teachers (representing majority) and their students (representing minority) so that reciprocal cultural stereotypes could be taken apart by both groups. However, this naïve solution assumes that there is equality between both minority and majority groups.

Basit's (1997b) study fails to acknowledge the power structures that shape lives of Asian Muslim girls. If an intersectional approach to analysis were adopted it could shed light on the way in which triple oppression of gender, race and class are understood in their specificity and the extent to which they shape the lives of Asian Muslim girls and their experiences of education. The experiences of Asian girls in education can only be fully accounted for if modes of differentiation such as race, gender and class are interrelated within the wider economic, political and historical framework (Parmar, 1988).

Shain (2000;2003) builds upon the approach taken by early resistance studies and locates her research within the wider historical and economic context. In presenting an account of Asian girls' experiences of education drawn directly from Asian girls themselves Shain discloses the active role Asian girls play in producing their identities. It presents a significant departure from the cultural pathology framework readings. Shain's (2000; 2003) main critiques of studies that solely focus on Asian culture is that they cast it as inferior to dominant Western culture and represent Asian culture as static and resistant to change.

My study takes a similar intersectional approach to data analysis. It brings to the fore the complex social and political factors that have

affected ESOL learning experiences of Bengali females within the context of further education sector. Starting the analysis from this particular context, the analysis (grounded at the micro level) is connected to the macro level of analysis. The research on Bengali female learners thus begins from the everyday educational experiences of a marginalised group of learners, and is then analysed in the wider social, political, economic and historical contexts to explore the factors that impinge upon their experiences of education.

Like Shain (2000; 2003) my study is also concerned to identify the strategies Bengali female learners of ESOL deploy to resist dominant stereotypes of passivity. However, I will refrain from using fixed typology. Shain identifies four different strategies adopted by four groups of girls. The use of fixed typologies stands in opposition to Shain's claim that 'identities are not fixed but are relational, complex, differentiated and constantly repositioned' (Shain, 2003: 38). The purpose of my study is to give an account of experiences of Bengali women that form an alternative to essentialist accounts of culture, identity or religion. In deconstructing the category of South Asian woman any claims made for the unity of culturally homogenous identities are taken apart.

Beyond hegemonic discourses: opening up new spaces

In this section I review the literature which seeks to open up alternative discourses that disrupt educational inequalities and exclusions. In particular I look at the way in which feminist studies of education have opened up new spaces, set up counter discourses by exposing the hierarchical binaries that determine prevailing discourses. Practices deployed by marginalised and silenced discourses are teased out to facilitate the creation of alternative

discourses. My study with Bengali women aims to identify practices deployed by Bengali female learners to resist or undercut the prevailing discourses of passivity. I examine the way in which Foucault's (1980) notion of power and subjectivity is used to make sense of the way of construction of particular students through prevailing discourses. The interrelationship between identity markers such as ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability and educational experiences is investigated to show how certain social and cultural identity markers are consonant with the notion of a good student.

Reay *et al.* 2009 study also highlights processes by which social inequalities are made and re-made through (higher) education. At the centre of such analysis is how class is mediated, modified and transformed through students' experiences of higher education. Despite the meritocracy rhetoric, whereby anyone who has the right attitude and motivation can fulfil their academic potential, working class students still find it difficult to gain access to traditional universities. Those working class students who gain access to elite universities may find themselves fitting academically but not socially with the institutional ethos and culture of the 'elite' HE institution. My study also considers the extent to which the experience of being a student impacts upon Bengali female raced, classed and gendered subjectivities. In section 1 of the literature review I have argued that the skills based approach underpinning Adult ESOL core curriculum serves to label and sort ESOL learners into obedient citizens of the future who are to be socialised into low paid positions, therefore serving the economic needs of the state.

Feminist studies have highlighted the extent to which social class and ethnicity interact with gender to impact upon girls' schooling experiences (Francis, 2000; Francis & Skelton, 2005; Walkerdine,

Lucey & Melody, 2001). Skelton *et al.* 2010 study on high achieving girls explores the extent to which gender facilitates academic achievement. Against the backdrop of boys' underachievement girls have been constructed as 'ideal pupils' (Skelton *et al.* 2010:7). The authors problematise the binary positioning of girls and boys in educational discourse since such positioning fails to address the educational needs of low achieving girls, many of whom are from ethnically diverse backgrounds. Francis argues that a counter discourse to boys' underachievement should be set up by researchers, teachers and policy makers since the policy focus on boys further marginalises the needs of girls. Skelton *et al.*, 2010 acknowledge that their sample of high achieving girls had marked underrepresentation of minority ethnic pupils considering the diverse nature of the population of the schools participating in the study. The focus of my study with Bengali female learners is to open up counter discourses. Bengali female learners, even though constructed as inactive in the policy discourses, have the potential to produce counter discourses that challenge dominant assumptions and definitions.

My study also explores the intersectionality of 'race', ethnicity and class in the production of femininities. It deals with issues of complexity and difference, detailing Bengali women's negotiations of classed, raced femininities across two educational sites and the labour market. I share Ali's (2003:13) concern to unpick meanings attached to ontological categories of 'race' and gender since these categories 'are not ontological categories of being, they are states of 'becoming' which change over time'. My study with Bengali female learners aims to destabilise hegemonic discourses that position women as inactive and passive victims of culture.

Mirza's (1992) study explored the impact race and gender have on black girls' experiences of schooling. It extended Fuller's (1984) study which opened up a new space since within the context of school the black female subculture was neither pro nor anti-education. However, Mirza critiques Fuller's use of subculture theory for diverting attention from the entrenched mechanisms of racial discrimination embedded through the work of various support agencies (such as career services and youth schemes). These agencies thwarted chances of success by steering black girls towards traditionally acceptable career paths (such as social work). Thus they were limiting career opportunities of high achieving girls as well as perpetuating the career paths deemed to be high-status options for black women. Parallels can be drawn with my study on female Bengali learning experiences' of ESOL provision. It is structured round a narrowly prescribed instrumental curriculum that fails to take into account needs of Bengali female learners with higher levels of linguistic or cultural capital. It prepares ESOL learners for the jobs that do not require higher level of linguistic competence, thus confining them to roles determined by/through policy discourses.

My study is conducted within an educational context and acknowledges that educational institutions are sites where Bengali women may be homogenised, problematized and may experience negative common stereotypes. Mirza's (1992) study unpicks the hegemonic discourse of educational underachievement for black girls and argues that most common stereotypes are based on raced and classed differences. It is through the process of homogenisation that black girls are identified as working class. Asian girls, as passive, quiet and shy, conform to different type of stereotype requirement of 'others' (Anthias & Yuval-Davis 1992; Brah, 1996). In an effort to open up space for alternative discourses my study aims to deconstruct

the notion of Bengali women as synonymous with passivity and continuously challenge it with the notions of Bengali women's agency.

My study will take on theoretical propositions adopted by Youdell (2005) to unpick hegemonic discourses on South Asian women which assign a passive role to this category. Acknowledging that diversity of South Asian women's experiences is constrained within enduring discourses, my study will deploy Foucault's conceptualisation of subjectivity whereby the subject is constituted through discourse. Such a conceptualisation advocates that subjectivity is always in process and constructed in relation with others and in everyday practices. Taking into account that the self is never stable but is constantly changing in response to particular situations, my study aims to open up spaces for alternative discourses in which Bengali female learners' response to educational practices may disrupt the hegemonic and prevailing discourses of passivity and uncover possibilities of alternative discourse positions. Hence, I identify those discursive performativities in Bengali women's accounts of education that have the potential to be constitutive of hitherto subordinated and disavowed discourses. Hence, the focus of my study is on exploring those practices that resist or undercut the hegemonic discourse and open up alternative discourses that celebrate diversity.

Language and Identity

The literature reviewed so far has included studies that have opened up new spaces beyond hegemonic discourses. To create an alternative, counter discourse to the one that positions Bengali female learners as victims of patriarchal culture, I make use of Foucault's theoretical framework and in particular his notion of discourse since it accounts for the fragmented nature of an individual. I take a post-

structuralist theoretical perspective of identity to understand how Bengali female learners construct their identities across two different educational institutions. Now I turn my attention to studies conducted in this tradition that emphasise ESOL learners' negotiated subjectivities (Norton. 1995; 2000). Norton's studies are relevant since she draws upon Foucault's notion of discourse, discursive practices and discursive positioning of an individual with relation to a number of competing discourses.

As I have argued current policy blames migrants for failing to integrate. This situation persists despite the provision of free ESOL classes intended to address language needs and, therefore, enable economic participation in society. Within the current policy the onus is placed on ESOL learners to take advantage of these opportunities. Drawing on a poststructuralist conception of social identity as fluid and subject to change, Norton (1995; 1997) conceptualises a theory of social identity which fuses the language learner and the language learning context. She argues that any interactions between language learners and proficient speakers of the target language (native or near-native speakers of English) need to be related to the wider socio-economic structure that places the language learners in a subordinate position. Every time language learners take part in a language exchange they are continuously negotiating and renegotiating their identity in relation to the social world.

The primary purpose of ESOL provision is to facilitate the language learning within the artificial confines of the classroom. In order to develop communicative competence, ESOL learners need to be exposed to communicative practice outside the artificial confines of the classroom. Disavowing power asymmetries that affect social relations between native and non-native speakers of the language,

Gardner and MacIntyre (1992: 213) argue that ‘the major characteristic of the informal context is that it is voluntary’. Such views fail to account for the lack of opportunities non-native speakers have to communicate with native or near native speakers. Some Bengali female learners of ESOL have limited opportunities to practise English outside the confines of the language classroom; not due to a lack of motivation but the lack of opportunity (Action for ESOL, Association of Colleges, AoC 2011). Within popular discourses Bengali female learners are constructed as inactive, lacking motivation to engage in employment and educational opportunities. Such a view fails to acknowledge the wider socio-economic factors that contribute to their marginalisation.

Norton’s work builds upon Bourdieu’s (1977) theories about the relationship between identity and symbolic power. Bourdieu’s understanding of language transcends the view that the language is merely a method of communication. The speaker’s use of the language is reflective of the social positioning of the speaker since it determines who has the ‘right to speak’ or ‘the power to impose reception’ (Bourdieu, 1977:75). The power dimensions impinge on any conversations between the second language speaker and the target language speaker. Those who speak consider those who listen as worthy to be listened to and vice versa (Norton, 2000). Therefore, the complex social identity of a second language learner needs to be understood in relation to the wider inequitable social structure and power relations. It is through the medium of language that Bengali learners of English make sense of themselves and the opportunities that access is denied or given.

Norton further draws upon the feminist post-structuralist theory of Weedon (1987) that takes into account the central role language plays

in the relationship between the individual and social world. For Weedon:

language is the place where actual and possible forms of social organization and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested. Yet it is also the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is constructed (1987:21).

For Foucault language is constitutive of reality and subjectivity. Even though language changes its meaning according to circumstances, events and situations need to be understood in the interface of discourse and subjectivity at specific times and places.

The post-structuralist conceptualisation of identity presents a significant departure from the humanist conceptualisation of identity as fixed, essential and unique. The self is not a knowable, perceived object—it is constructed by the discourse in which it is positioned and positions itself. This conceptualisation of subjectivity as a site of struggle alludes to the multiple and contradictory nature of identity. The implications of an unstable self are that there is no one ‘true’ knowledge because it is dependent upon the discourse in which it is produced. The shifting, multifaceted and contradictory nature of human subjectivity resonates with the work of black feminists that challenges notions of culturally homogenous and racially purified identities. Post-structuralism depicts individuals as diverse, multiple and constantly in the position of challenging and fracturing the hegemonic meanings that have assigned South Asians women a passive role (Brah & Minhas, 1985; Parmar, 1990; Rutherford, 1990; Shain, 2000; 2003).

What is central to this conceptualisation of subjectivity is that the subject is assigned an active role. By assigning a subject an active

role the subject is 'conceived as both subject of and subject to relations of power within a particular site' (Norton, 2005:15). Even though a South Asian woman may be placed in the subordinate position within a particular discourse, she may resist this positioning by resisting dominant discourse and setting up a counter discourse. This negotiation of discourses builds upon Foucault's use of the term discourse to designate the interplay between power and knowledge. It is through discourse that human beings are produced but also power relations are maintained and challenged. Through Bengali women's accounts I aim to identify competing discourses as well as strategies women employ to avoid the process of 'othering'. I hope to substantiate my view that there is no one 'truth' or unitary subject. The counter discourse is set up by 'imposing the right to speak' (Bourdieu, 1977). By highlighting the contradictory nature of subjectivity as a site of continuous struggle, the transcending nature of identity can be further explored.

Norton's work is significant for my study as it illustrates the extent to which language and identity are fused in the constructions of identities. It is through language that Bengali female learners resist the inactive/passive position within the prevailing discourse. Taking an intersectional approach to analysis it is Norton's view that the power to speak cannot be isolated from the social positioning of the participants which recognises wider socio economic factors that contribute to the subordination of black groups in Britain. As the most marginalised groups of learners in the current field of ESOL, female ESOL learners may have a limited 'right to speak' or 'the power to impose reception' (Bourdieu, 1977:75). The language learner's right to speak is fused with the language identity. Taking into account the multiple, changing, and contradictory identities of language learners, Bengali female learners may take up different positions within the

dominant discourses. Through what Norton labels 'investment' in their language and their identity, Bengali female learners are continuously engaged in identity work. Bengali female learners may develop different strategies to resist being positioned as passive.

Conclusion

This chapter has illustrated that ESOL policy is in many ways oppressive. This is especially evident in the nature of the curriculum which does not acknowledge the heterogeneity of Asian women's experiences of education and employment. With the narrow and prescriptive focus on employment the curriculum aims to mould South Asian women into obedient citizens of the future (Cooke, 2006; Cooke & Simpson, 2009), thus replicating the image of passivity that is rooted in colonialism and imperialism and further reproduced by some white feminist and through media discourses.

The second main body of literature reviewed the 'culturalist perspective' and the subsequent 'resistance school'. These contributions to understanding young women in schools are important because they advocate the need to move away from pathological constructions of Asian families. Within this literature family is represented as the root of Asian women's difficulties which distracts attention from deep-seated racial, sexual and class inequalities.

The aim of this study is to look beyond easy images and stereotypes of South Asian women to unearth a more complex picture. Focusing on a small group of Bengali female learners of English this study hopes to give an account of the emergent identities of Bengali women within the further education sector. Taking into account the imperialist and colonial past of Britain I will draw on the black feminists'

intersectional approach to class, race and gender to account for the ways in which Asian women resist passive images assigned to them. This study of experiences of Bangladeshi women within further educational institutions in Britain aims to contribute to, extend and challenge the research conducted by Brah & Minhas (1985), Parmar (1988) and Shain (2000) as it seeks to identify different ways /strategies adopted by Bangladeshi women in relation to dominant discourses of their passivity.

Chapter 2: Methodology

Introduction

In this chapter I lay the groundwork for the use of a feminist epistemological framework to explore Bengali female learners' experiences of ESOL within the further education sector. The chapter is divided into three parts. The first part is concerned with the more practical aspects of the study outlining the aims and objectives of the study, underpinning rationale for engaging in research with Bengali female participants; a description of the fieldwork settings; and I recount difficulties in recruiting participants for the project and touch upon topics used in interviews with participants and staff.

In the second part of this chapter (Part B) I consider the methodological and ethical issues which arise in doing cross-cultural research. It is a personal account of how I, as a white, non-Muslim, European woman, engaged in cross-cultural research with Muslim women of Bangladeshi origin. Here I reject the view that the dichotomy between the researcher and the researched needs to be maintained through the research process. Therefore, the subjectivity of the researcher is fully accounted for through a process of 'strong reflexivity' (Harding, 2004) wherein I critically explore the

assumptions/ values I bring to the research process. Browsing through my fieldwork notes I also consider how I went about establishing and maintaining reciprocal relationships between the researcher and participants in order to achieve emancipatory research.

Acknowledging the fluid nature of power between the researcher and participants I consider, in some detail, the extent to which power imbued my research with Bengali female participants.

The third section of this chapter (Part C) explores the theoretical framework underpinning the study. I begin by justifying the use of life history methods in research with Bengali female participants. In introducing the genesis of the postcolonial framework I aim to justify its use. As an overarching theoretical perspective it guides my approach to fieldwork, data analysis and the production of knowledge. I also justify the use of Foucault's conceptualisation of power as a significant theoretical lens to facilitate the production of alternative forms of knowledge.

Part A: setting the scene

Aims and objectives of the study

The study on Bengali female learners within the FE sector explores how hegemonic discourses on Asian femininities shape subjective identity construction. I endeavour to explore the issues from the perspective of Bengali female learners, thus taking into account how markers of difference such as 'race' and class impact upon women's experience of education. In representing the voices and experiences of women that have been silenced, my study aims to dismantle and unsettle dominant constructions of Bengali female learners as passive and expose a set of counter- narratives or reverse discourses.

The aims of this study are to:

1. explore how Bengali female learners of ESOL are positioned and position themselves in relation to dominant discourses
2. open up spaces for non-hegemonic readings of Bengali femininities; and
3. identify discursive strategies employed by Bengali women to trouble/ unsettle dominant discourses that reduce Bengali women to 'docile bodies' (Foucault, 1979)

The focus of the study is confined to Bengali women's experiences of ESOL within the FE. It locates issues concerning Bengali women within the wider debates of ESOL educational policy, racism and structural inequalities that operate on a range of economic and social levels.

Whilst this research explores the way in which Bengali women understood and constructed their ethnic and gender identities within the FE sector, the debate surrounding identity construction is not only specific to Bengali female learners. It is linked to the wider representation of minority ethnic femininities within educational discourse. In the previous chapter I have argued that within ESOL education policy Bengali women, alongside other minority ethnic female groups, constitute a key target group due to low rates of participation in employment and education.

Why Bengali women?

First I want to acknowledge reasons for engaging in research with Bengali women. My interest in researching educational experiences of Bengali women stems from my professional experience of teaching this group of ESOL learners within the work based context. Work based ESOL training delivered in conjunction with Job Centre Plus

(JCP) was aimed at developing the employability skills of students for whom English was a second language. The programme itself consisted of 30 hours per week of learning English and attending a work placement. As the programme itself was compulsory and intended solely for those learners who were in receipt of job seekers benefits, there was an expectation on the part of learners to engage fully with the content of the programme or risk having sanctions placed upon their benefits. Despite the programme not fully meeting the needs of these learners either through presenting limited language opportunities for more able Bengali learners or inadequate support for those less able learners, the majority of Bengali learners developed their own strategies to make best use of the programme and achieve what they could in terms of education or employment.

My personal account of working with Bengali female learners dispels myths perpetuated in various discourses (dominant political and academic discourses) that Asian women are passive and devoid of agency. Racialised and gendered assumptions have intermeshed to generate particular stereotypes of the Asian woman as the bearer of an 'oppressive cultural heritage' (Lutz, 1991; Brah, 1992a).

My intention here is to make space for alternative discourses and to hear the voices of Bengali women within the field of ESOL. Factors such as marital status, caring and domestic attitudes are cited as preventing Bengali female learners from accessing learning opportunities (Heath & Cheung, 2006; Ward & Spacey, 2008). These dominant constructions of Asian women do not align with my experience of working with Bengali female learners who routinely expressed ambivalent and conflicting attitudes towards a variety of cultural practices. These accounts challenge dominant discourses about imagined gender relations within Asian communities.

Setting my research within two adult institutions specialising in delivering ESOL training opportunities I seek to facilitate the production of diverse Asian subjectivities through the personal narratives of Bengali female learners in the context of adult ESOL provision. These narratives establish diverse subject positions which may contest dominant constructions of Bengali female learners as passive. Actively engaging in processes of dismantling dominant cultural and racial representations of Asian women I seek to establish space for alternative constructions.

Therefore, my professional experience of working with Bengali female learners in the compulsory ESOL setting and personal experience of learning English as a second language were the main reasons for wanting to undertake research into the lives of women who are culturally and structurally diverse to me.

Settings

The two adult ESOL provisions: the FE environment and the adult education centre

In this section I describe the two adult education centres where I carried out my fieldwork and explain why these centres were considered suitable for the purpose of my study.

This qualitative study examines the experiences of ESOL Bengali female learners within two significantly different educational provisions in London. The first provision is a FE college with the focus on second language learners gaining English skills for social inclusion. The main focus of the second provision- (a government -funded private training provider)- is on helping the second language learners gain a functional level of English for employability.

The FE environment

The FE College involved in the research project is based in East London. This area of London is one of the poorest boroughs in Britain. It is home to a diverse range of ethnic groups, including over 60,000 Bangladeshi people. The College acts a major provider of basic skills education; many Bengali learners rely on this college to access basic skills classes to enable them to access further education and employment opportunities.

Despite the college successfully running its ESOL provision for many years, in 2009 under 'A New Approach to ESOL' many community classes were closed (BIS, 2009). This had a particular impact upon Bengali women with childcare needs and for those who were either not able to pay fees or evidence hardship. (ESOL New Approach May 2009 NATECLA statement referenced in 'Defend ESOL! Support Tower Hamlets College staff').

In September 2011 the college funded approximately 24 courses reaching an average of 300 ESOL learners. The college management has employed a strategy to rescue ESOL provision from a significant reduction in delivery by encouraging learners considered to be inactive to self-declare that they are actively looking for work. The self-declaration form is a key piece of evidence to attract funding to ESOL courses that students are otherwise not able to afford. This U-turn on funding for ESOL classes for immigrants follows funding regulations announced in November 2010's skills strategy (BIS, 2010). The government planned to focus fully funded ESOL courses on those actively seeking work, such as those claiming Jobseekers Allowance and Employment Support Allowance. Learners claiming Income support, Working Tax Credits and housing benefit – who had

previously been eligible for fully funded English courses – were expected to pay at least half the cost of their lessons or have them funded by their employer.

The FE College highlights the strains management, learners and tutors were placed under to ensure that ESOL classes continue meeting needs of ESOL female learners of Bengali background. According to the college's self-assessment report 2009/10 the largest ethnic group were Bangladeshis (53%). A significantly larger number of female learners attended ESOL courses than male (2890 in comparison to 1679 of male learners).

The training provider

The second organisation is the voluntary and community hub working with and for the 42,000 people who live in North Southwark and North Lambeth, and beyond. It was founded in 1887 by women from Oxford and Cambridge Universities. In its present form it is dedicated to creating social and economic opportunity working with and for local people.

Since September 2011 it has entered into partnership with another adult education centre to run accredited basic education and training courses. Programmes include ESOL courses at various levels, some delivered over an academic year from September to July, alongside more intensive courses lasting 13 weeks.

The intensive ESOL courses are tailored to suit Job Centre Plus (JCP) organisational needs. Despite initial expectation that intensive ESOL classes would be created as a response to the JCP demands, they have nevertheless attracted fee paying learners.

There is a small minority of ESOL female learners of Bengali background, who despite completing that level of study in JCP funded training providers, have nonetheless been mandated to attend it. The courses do not directly meet their language needs as they have already achieved a full level of ESOL at an intermediate level of study in speaking, listening, reading and writing with other training providers. Moreover, this poses institutional constraints for funding as the training provider cannot gain funding for the level at which the learner has already gained a qualification.

What is particularly interesting for the purposes of this study is the mandatory nature of ESOL provision: these learners are attending the courses to ensure they will continue to receive their jobseeker's benefits. Their language needs are not being met as they have not been entered for the level of study above the one already attained (Level 1).

Making contact: unexpected trials and tribulations

Here I give an account of how my classed, 'raced' and gendered subjectivity, my personal experiences of learning and teaching English as a second language impacted upon the recruitment of participants in ways over which I had little control.

From October 2011 until June 2012 I spent on average two days a week conducting fieldwork at the college and training provider. I returned to fieldwork in December 2012 to re-interview some participants to capture shifting identities through time, place and space.

As a feminist researcher I am committed to a reflexive approach throughout all stages of the research process that would contribute to the feminist goal of emancipatory research (Harding, 1993; Haraway, 1998). Feminist conceptualisations of knowledge claims require more self-reflective skills than expected within traditional positivist paradigms where the goal is objectivity. Within feminist research the social position of the researcher is given considerable consideration to avoid exploitative research practices for which positivist approaches have received criticism (Harding, 1987; Lather, 1988; Edwards, 1990; Stanley and Wise, 1990). For example, Morawski claims:

when the experimenter is white, the ‘race’ of the experimenter is held to be unrelated to his or her cognition, whereas the ‘race’ of the subject is held to possibly affect his/her cognitions. (1997:115)

In this section through practices of reflexivity I recognise, examine, and understand how my social background, location, and assumptions affect all aspects of research practice.

As a feminist researcher and teacher from Croatia it is important to provide an account of how my multiple identities have impacted upon my understanding of the self and my research interests (Butler, 2005). My successful history of learning English as a second language inevitably influenced my decisions to pursue a career in teaching English as an additional language. However, teaching the language that is my second language has not neatly fitted into the normative understanding of an ‘ESOL teacher’ that is – a middle class female, native speaker. Being positioned as a non-legitimate native-speaker of English (Braine, 1999; Kamhi-Stein, 2004; Leung, Harris, & Rampton, 1997) entails being positioned as a non-legitimate ESOL

teacher within the educational discourse which normatively equates the ESOL practitioner with British middle classed whiteness (Amin, 2001; Curtis & Romney, 2006; Kubota & Lin, 2006; Lin & Luke, 2006).

When embarking upon the fieldwork I was constantly grappling with the issue of double researcher/teacher subjectivity. Due to my teaching biography it was relatively easy to make contact with the ESOL managers and to gain permission to visit ESOL classes. Teachers, once they were briefed by their course managers about the purposes of the study, were open to my visits of their classes as long as it did not interfere with their lessons. So we usually had my visits scheduled at the beginning or the end of the class. I agreed with teachers that I would be introduced as a researcher who has no direct connection to the institution. Despite my conscious efforts to downplay my teaching persona, the students of the classes I visited were still interested to know if I was a teacher elsewhere.

Even though my teaching biography enabled me to secure access to the educational institutions, getting participants on board was an entirely different matter. Since I was not working as a teacher at the institution where I was doing the research, the participants found it easier to refuse to take part in the research. Skeggs (1997) notes that she relied on her teaching background to recruit the participants for her study. Their apparent willingness to engage in a study, Skeggs argues, also demonstrated their powerlessness. However, I do not construct Bengali women in this research as powerless by the nature of their classed, 'raced' and gendered subjectivities.

I first visited the college in early October 2011, by mid-November three participants had volunteered. Whilst there was no guarantee how Bengali female participants would respond to a middle-aged Eastern

European woman, I did not expect total indifference in the first few weeks.

Entering the fieldwork, I tried to remain aware of differences and some similarities between me and Bengali female learners of ESOL. Reciprocal explorations of commonality and difference between a researcher and participant remain a central concern for post-structuralist feminists (Reay, 2001; Francis, 2001; Archer *et al.* 2002). The distance between me and my participants was greater than I anticipated. As an Eastern European white researcher I was initially unaware how my whiteness may be constructed by Bengali female learners. Edwards (1996: 85) writes that the powerfulness of whiteness should not be denounced in the research process since participants of a different race to the white researcher's may construct the researcher as 'an untrustworthy white institutional figure'. Indeed, some black feminists would argue that white women should not engage in the process of researching participants of different cultural background to their own since the white researcher will have no shared understanding of racism (Adelman, 1985; Lashley, 1986; Essed, 1990). The argument put forward is that, I, as a white researcher would not fully understand the lives of Bengali female learners or would be inclined to homogenise Bengali female learners' accounts of their lives.

As a white woman living in Britain for over 20 years I have yet to encounter any overt racism. Undoubtedly my Eastern European accent and appearance sets me apart and makes me an object of polite curiosity. Even though I have not come across any racism, I have experienced nationalism in my native country as a child of mixed nationality parents. As an immigrant to Britain I also shared the

experience of settling into a new country and adjusting to the new way of life and culture that was not too dissimilar to my own.

However, to have experienced nationalism is not necessarily to share experience of racism and to have to live with and challenge the power relations around oppression, class and race. I acknowledge black feminists' argument that social decisions around race differentially impact upon the daily lives of Bengali female learners (Collins 1990; Brewster 1993).

Bhopal (2001) argues that the racial identity of the researcher impacts upon the research process, whereby the participants who share the background of the researcher are more likely to share their experiences. Referring to her research with female Asian participants Bhopal (2001) argues that the researcher's whiteness is deconstructed as powerful in research interviews. She echoes views of Adelman (1985), Lashley (1986) and Essed (1990) when arguing that Asian participants would not be able to confide in a white researcher about their experiences of racism. On the other hand, being of white 'other' background, working in the field of ESOL where my 'otherness' positions me as a non-legitimate speaker, I feel that this 'otherness' offers me some insight into what it means to be constructed as 'other' on a day-to-day basis.

Engaging in a process of researcher reflexivity I feel I may be able to find commonalities with Bengali female participants. A commitment to responsibility 'to trace the other in self' (Spivak, 1990:47) means that it may be possible to forge commonalities between white other middle aged woman and Bengali female participants of diverse backgrounds. Holding on to commonalities while taking into account differences as a researcher of different ethnic background to that of my participants, I

was looking to establish and maintain a dialogue that would enable me to explore the 'other in self' (Spivak, 1990:47) and thereby resolve methodological limitations posed by Bhopal (2001).

I did not want to fall into a binary trap where it could have been argued that as a white Eastern European researcher, who has no overt experience of racism, I cannot possibly understand and represent Bengali women's subjective experiences and social positions. If I was to subscribe to this view, I would have embraced binarised and simplistic notions of 'similarity/difference' which advocate for researchers and participants to be matched (Bhavnani, 1993 & Phoenix, 1994). These reductive notions of difference will be further explored and alternatives proposed in the dealing with difference section of this chapter. The insider status is further granted to the researcher who shares the cultural background of the participants. Situating my research within the poststructuralist framework I acknowledge fragmentation and the fluid and shifting nature of race, class and gender categories (Archer *et al.* 2001; Francis, 2001). Francis & Archer (2005) argue against postulating that some characteristics such as gender and/or age and/or race should be more salient.

Post-structuralist conceptualisations of identities as consistently in the 'process of becoming' (Alexander, 1996) mean that the matching between participants and researchers in all criteria can never be achieved (Ramazanglu with Holland, 2002; Archer, 2002; Francis, 2001; Francis & Archer, 2005). A social background matching between researchers/participants also reduces possibilities to 'theorise multi-layered, hyphenated, hybridized and potential conflicting subjectivities' (Ang-Lygate, 1996: 57). Phoenix (1994) argues that 'racial matching' of researcher and participants in her study did not necessarily produce

'better' data. Rhodes (1994) disputes that racial matching between participants and researchers places the researcher in the overall control of the research and argues that the participants may be more inclined to share particular knowledge/views with the interviewer of a different racial background.

Engaging in cross-cultural research I challenge the view that the researcher should only engage in research with those participants of a similar background to that of the researcher (Essed, 1990; Wilson, 1984; Blair, 1995; Bhopal, 2001). Such representation would foreclose the possibility of a 'multiplicity' of voices in any research field and lead to further marginalisation within the research process. The notion of matching researchers and participants is based upon essentialist conceptualisation of identities and is therefore firmly rooted within the tradition of identity politics (Yuval-Davies, 1994).

My commitment to cross-cultural research requires me to engage in a high degree of reflexivity—thus openly disclosing reasons for engaging in research with participants who are of different background to my own (Edwards, 1990) and acknowledging consistently shifting power differentials between the researcher and the participants as 'shifting, multiple and intersecting' (Tharpar-Bjorket & Henry, 2004: 364). As I write through my own race and class lens in the process of gathering and writing up data, hereby disclosing the 'otherness' of my whiteness, I am deconstructing the powerful position my whiteness may have otherwise granted me through the research process and reflecting on the way in which the power differentials between researcher and participants shift according to structural differences in race, class, age and other variables.

Representations of women who are so distinct from each other in terms of race, culture, religion, class, age, motherhood status or any other variables, should acknowledge the interdependence of researcher/participants subjectivities (Henwood & Pidgreon, 1995). Locating the study within a post-structuralist framework it is important to examine the multiple/shifting identities of the researcher and participants and the consequences for knowledge claims that can be made through the research process (Gray, 2007) and bring to the forefront any ambiguities and tensions that arise through the research.

Archer (2002) explored the impact of the interviewer's race in the research by conducting a comparative reading of white/Asian interview accounts. She argues that the interviewer is not a neutral figure since commonalities between interviewer and participants do not necessarily mean mutual interests but can also be a source of conflict. Archer's comparative analysis adds weight to the argument that the shared ethnicity/race between researcher and participants does not lead to 'truer' data. The inclusion of comparative analysis does not preclude engagement, on the part of the researcher, with issues of power, control of the research and representation. Archer (2002) argues that woman-to-woman interviews enabled her to form a bond with her participants and facilitate discussion of more difficult topics despite important differences between her and her participants in terms of class, religion and race. However, Archer argues that the gender identification did not transcend the race position since the shared gender and 'race' identity construction came to prominence in interviews with an Asian researcher. The issues of race were more difficult to explore in interviews with the white researcher. Similarly, Finch (1993) found that woman-to-woman interviews enabled her to establish rapport and validate their concerns.

Exploring differences and similarities in the research process I must account for 'the difference my difference makes' (Reay, 1996a:443). Reay warns of the danger of conducting research with participants of similar background to that of the researcher. As a researcher she found herself conflating her own experiences with that of her participants. Indeed, engaging in a pre-doctoral pilot study on ESOL learning experiences of Eastern European participants at an adult education centre, I found myself sharing my experiences of learning English in my country of origin and unintentionally eliciting similar experiences from my participants.

Embarking upon research with participants of different backgrounds to my own I aim to explore the extent to which my participants' construction of my whiteness may silence certain discourses and facilitate others. Whilst my 'otherness' does not fit into the normative ESOL tutor category, I am interested to explore how my whiteness will be constructed. Archer (2002) found that her whiteness was not constructed as a monolithic identity. Archer's understanding and experience of Asian culture enabled her to find commonalities with her participants which I was also seeking to establish with the potential participants.

I also have personal knowledge and experience of Asian culture. Having lived in a predominantly Asian neighbourhood I have made close friendships with Asian families and in many respects I have been accepted as a part of this Asian community. Other commonalities I was able to find with my participants were my past history of learning English as a second language and experience of settling into a new country. My professional experience of working with Bengali female learners on various ESOL projects in different adult education settings gave me initial confidence of recruiting participants for my study. I felt

that as a teacher of ESOL I was able to build a good rapport with my learners. However, this teaching relationship was characterised with rather 'static' power differentials to the ones I encountered in my efforts to recruit Bengali participants onto the project. As a teacher I was able to exercise a greater degree of control than as a researcher and did not come across many situations in my teaching career where I felt as powerless as I did at the start of the fieldwork. Even though as a researcher I was in overall control of the project, Bengali female participants were able to shift the balance of power between us. Whilst the majority of learners I visited to introduce to the project did not openly resist the notion of participating, this unwillingness was demonstrated in more subtle ways such as not turning up for the interviews without any prior notification or cancelling them at the last minute. This made me feel powerless since my project was entirely dependent upon successful recruitment of participants. I did not anticipate this lack of responsiveness and commitment since there is an assumption that this group of learners is meek and passive and would, therefore, be forthcoming to my efforts to engage them in the research process. Upon entering the field, I examined my own views about this group of learners and started to question if prior to entering the field I had also fallen into a trap of homogenising Bengali female learners as passive. In a way this initial difficulty of recruiting participants to the research considerably shifted the focus of this research and made Bengali women's agency the focal point of my thesis.

At the training provider, in addition to a lack of interest from participants, I also had difficulty in securing a room where I could conduct interviews in private. The ESOL provision was run on a much smaller scale, what has become known in the ESOL community as 'ESOL on a shoe string'. Even when I managed to secure participation

of learners, due to lack of private space, I often had to abandon the interviews. In arranging interview slots at the end of the class, it was not always possible to finish them within the time available.

Arranging interviews at the end of the class meant that interviews were often terminated due to childcare commitments. For example, I had to reschedule the appointment with one of the participants eight times due to various reasons. Since the participant was really enthusiastic about the study, retrospectively I feel that the interview was worth the wait.

The many difficulties encountered in securing participation might have led to the conclusion that the participants represented a difficult sample. Such a construction of the participants would to some degree echo negative stereotypes of them in the policy and media discourses as 'inactive' and 'passive' (Brah & Minhas, 1986; Mama, 1985). Instead of perpetuating negative constructions of participants, Bengali women's resistance to my attempts to engage them in a project highlighted women's agency (Brah, 1996; Dwyer, 2000; Shain, 2000, 2003). Thus retrospectively, I feel that conducting the research at the institutions where I did not hold teaching positions enabled me to gain insights into the women's agency, i.e. their ability to refuse the interviews and negotiate terms and conditions of interviews. Had I worked at institutions where I carried out the research, Bengali women would have found it more difficult to refuse the research (Skeggs, 1997). I return to this topic when discussing the fluid nature of power in the research process.

Starting the field work

In order to access participants for the study appropriate ESOL classes were identified by ESOL managers. One-to-one life history interviews covered a range of topics: experience of learning English in this country or abroad; reasons for attending ESOL classes and anticipated outcomes; previous employment and their hopes and aspirations for future. Using life-history methods the interviews were contextualised within their wider histories of learning, work, family and migration.

With permission of ESOL teachers I visited those classes and introduced ESOL learners to the project. Interviews were conducted in private rooms. Even though potential participants were notified of the aims of study at my class visits, those aims were reiterated to them at the start of each interview. Addressing unequal power relations between the researcher and participants, I also notified Bengali participants as to what would happen to the data and who would be granted access to it (Harding, 1987; Lather, 1988; Stanley & Wise, 1990). I reiterated to each participant that the purpose of the research was for my doctoral study.

In addition, I also conducted one-to-one interviews with two members of teaching staff per organisation who were involved in delivery of ESOL for these learners. The focus of these interviews was on their construction of Bengali female learners within the ESOL policy agenda; views of the purpose of ESOL; and the perceived effectiveness of the methods they were using in meeting learners' aspirations, in particular female Bengali learners. In particular, the focus of interviews was on their perception of Bengali ESOL female learners positioning in relation to the external funding body requirements and wider policy agendas.

I return to the life history methods as a preferred method in the Section C of this chapter where I discuss the reasons for its use in research with Bengali female participants.

Bengali female participants' sample at both sites of research

I interviewed 20 Bengali female participants, 10 at each institution. All participants were aged between 22 and 40. Of the 20 participants, 16 were married, two separated and two divorced. The majority of participants were mothers: 18 out of 20. In terms of their educational background all participants were educated to GCSE level and above and had a prior experience of learning English in Bangladesh. All participants were students of ESOL at the institutions where fieldwork was conducted and studying towards L1 of ESOL (an upper intermediate level of English). As with any groups of ESOL learners, the participants recruited were a diverse group in terms of ability to communicate fluently. With participants being at Level 1 of ESOL, a level above the E3 level of ESOL that is considered to be a national minimum level to communicate effectively, their overall competence in English did not act as a barrier to generating interview data.

Participants' names have been anonymised to protect identity.

Adopting an intersectional approach to analysis here (i.e. age, gender, parental and marital status) I outline class as one of the axes of differentiation that is central to my study.

The way in which I determine class positioning of my participants follows Bourdieu's conceptualisation of class as a process, in particular Bourdieu's notion of habitus (1990b: 190). Bourdieu's conceptualisation of habitus enables us to move beyond simply economic understanding of social class since his conceptualisation of

class promotes interdependency of structure and agency. It demonstrates the way in which the individual is immersed in social structure but also the way in which the social world is ingrained in the body by means of dispositions (Bourdieu, 1981).

I have based my analysis of participants' class background on the basis of their class origin in Bangladesh. The class origin of participants is determined by professional/semi-professional backgrounds of parents. Building on Bourdieu's conceptualisation of social class as a process, class is experienced differently by migrants in Britain. It is likely that some participants experienced downward mobility from their middle-class status upon arrival in Britain.

In addition to the class background of the participants, it would have been interesting to consider how the language background of the participants interacts with other axes of differentiation such as class, race and gender. Whilst history methods I have employed for the purpose of this study have elicited some information about the participants' language background, the data gathered is not sufficient to include it in this study. However, in any future research I will purposefully include the language background of participants in my life history interview prompts since it will contribute to the more nuanced analysis of the data.

Retrospectively, the research was undertaken to explore dominant ways in which Bengali women are conceptualised within educational discourses. I wanted to foreground a theorisation of femininity as inherently racialised and classed. Adopting an intersectional approach to analysis I wanted to explore how Bengali women constructed gendered, racialised, classed identities and how constructions of identities is cross-cut by competing discourses of culture, religion and

racism. In an effort to open up alternative spaces for Bengali women such an analysis explores the extent to which women gain power from their studies to take up or reject the discursive positions offered to them in terms of what have, for the purposes of this study, been identified as primary discourses of class, ‘race’ and gender.

I illustrate the diversity of the sample of Bengali female participants at the time of research in the table 1 below.

Table 1: Bengali female ESOL learners’ profile at FE college

Pseudonym	Age	Marital status	Parental status	Education	Class origin
Afruza	24	Divorced	2 children	High school	Working class
Faiza	31	Married	2 daughters	Primary school	Working class
Polly	29	Married	None	5 ‘A’ levels	Middle class
Rashida	28	Separated	1 son	Philosophy & Economics Graduate	Middle class
Riana	31	Married	3 children	‘A’ level Teaching Assistant	Working class
Saima	31	Married	1 son	History Graduate	Working class
Shafika	23	Married	None	Economics Graduate	Lower middle class

Shahida	38	Married	1 son and 2 daughters	CSCs–GCSEs equivalent	Working class
Shamima	25	Married	1 child	Economics Graduate	Middle class
Tequila	37	Married	2 sons	Philosophy Graduate	Middle class

Table 2: Bengali female ESOL learners’ profile at the training provider

Pseudonym	Age	Marital status	Parental status	Education	Class origin
Dilwara	39	Married	4 children	SSCs–GCSEs equivalent	Working class
Fatima	36	Divorced	3 children	High school	Working class
Mallika	31	Married	2 children	SSCs–GCSEs equivalent	Lower Middle class
Mana	34	Married	4 children	Sociology Graduate	Working class
Mani	31	Married	1 child	Business Graduate	Lower Middle class
Mistu	32	Separated	1 child	Humanities Degree	Working class
Shaharin	23	Married	1 child	Humanities Degree	Lower middle–class

Sharifa	40	Married	3 children	Philosophy Graduate	Higher middle-class
Shimu	29	Married	2 children	Business Admin Graduate	Higher middle-class
Tara	34	Married	3 children	Economics Graduate	Lower middle class

Bengali female ESOL participants' previous levels of education

Within this section I set out the women's previous levels of education, previous experiences of learning ESOL in Bangladesh and in this country, reasons for studying English and future plans in terms of education. All the women interviewed in the sample were first generation migrants and were enrolled on an intermediate E3 level ESOL course of study. The majority of the participants came to the UK as brides.

All of the participants were asked about their levels of educational attainment before coming to the UK. This question on educational background and time spent in schooling in Bangladesh is important, as Basic English is taught to every child attending state-funded primary school and continues to be compulsory up to the age of 18 (Bangladeshi Government's website from the National Curriculum & Textbook Board)

Educational profiles in the table (3) below demonstrate a wide heterogeneity of the sample. Of the 10 women interviewed at the FE College, all had some form of education from Bangladesh ranging from

primary school to a degree level of study. At the time of interviews five participants were graduates; two were high school leavers with completed A-levels: one participant completed primary school while two left school with CSCE (GCSEs equivalents).

Table 3
Educational profiles of Bengali female participants at FE College

Pseudonym	Previous educational background
Afruza	High school
Faiza	Primary school
Polly	5 'A' levels
Rashida	Philosophy and Economics Graduate
Riana	A level teaching assistant qualifications
Saima	History Graduate
Shafika	Economics Graduate
Shahida	SSCs- GCSEs equivalents
Shamima	Economics Graduate
Tequila	Philosophy Graduate

The proportion of graduates at the training provider was even higher. In this sample there were seven graduates, two participants who left school with CSCEs and 1 high school leaver.

Table 2
Educational profiles of Bengali female participants at the training provider

Pseudonym	Previous educational background
Dilwara	CSCEs /GCSEs equivalents
Fatima	High school
Mallika	SSCEs /GCSEs equivalents
Mana	Sociology Graduate
Mani	Business Graduate
Mistu	Humanities Graduate
Shaharin	Humanities Graduate
Sharifa	Philosophy Graduate
Shimu	Business admin Graduate

The samples demonstrate that despite limited English language skills these women are generally very highly educated. This finding is supported by other studies exploring educational achievements of South Asian women (Ahmad *et al.* 2003; Aston *et al.* 2007; Brah, 1996).

Furthermore, the finding that out of 20 participants recruited for the study, 12 are graduates contrasts with the statistics relating to women and learning (Aldridge *et al.* 2008). Accordingly, Bengali women, alongside Pakistani and Somali women, are least likely to engage in learning opportunities. Moreover, Bangladeshi women are least likely to have higher-level qualifications prior to migration: only 12 % of women have Level 4 qualification and above.

However, the sample's high educational attainment prior to migration is in stark contrast to the problematic and stigmatised presentation of this group in various media and policy documents due to 'low' achievement both in terms of employment and education (Dale *et al.* 2002; Tuckey, 2007; Spacey & Ward, 2007). Drawing on data from this research I want to put forward an argument that government's lack of recognition of prior learning disadvantages and marginalises this group of learners further through particular discourses of education and employment which are inflected by race and ethnicity.

Summary of Part A

So far I have discussed the reasons for engaging in research with Bengali female participants, and recognised some of the complexities of the insider/outsider debate. I have also described the settings

within which the fieldwork was conducted and methods I used with staff and participants. In the second part of this chapter I engage with the theoretical framework within which this study is situated and consider some ethical and methodical dilemmas pertinent to research with Bengali female learners. In the later sections I delve further into the insider/outsider debate since my position in research as a white/other, non-Muslim woman is quite pertinent to my study.

Part B: Feminist research methodology

This second section outlines the key principles of feminist methodology and highlights their pertinence to my research with participants from a diverse structural location to my own.

My research project draws upon a feminist epistemological framework. Feminist epistemology has been referred to as a study of 'feminist ways of knowing' (Anderson, 1995:50) as its central focus is to consider the extent to which gender determines our construction of knowledge. Starting research from the lives of Bengali women validates their knowledge and includes them in knowledge making processes (Smith, 1987; Harding, 1993) from which they have traditionally been excluded but also transcends the traditional positivist power relations where they are objectified through knowledge making processes. By adopting a feminist framework my aim is to produce knowledge rooted in female Bengali learners' experiences of learning ESOL which may help to improve their lives.

The feminist epistemological framework I will be using is one that rejects positivism. The androcentric representation of knowledge claims to 'truth' ignores the gendered nature of social phenomena. It marginalizes or ignores the experiences of women and other oppressed groups (Fawcett & Hearn, 2004; Haraway, 1988; Harding,

1991; Stanley & Wise, 1983). At the heart of this feminist epistemology is a commitment to generate research that is *for* women and not only *about* women so that oppressive and exploitative conditions in society that contribute to their marginalization can be altered (Fonow & Cook, 2005).

Second wave feminists drew attention to sex/gender and inequalities. Beauvoir (1949) argued that women were constructed as 'other' in the patriarchal society where impersonal and scientific knowledge is presented as a male norm. In societies where acquisition or production of this kind of knowledge could distract women from their main reproductive function, Beauvoir argues, women were perceived to be a 'second sex'. Women were excluded from any knowledge validation processes in case they gained positions of authority within the society where knowledge production was conceived as a male sphere. Within the second wave feminist movement the primary focus was on establishing social and political equality by revealing deeply androcentric bias in western societies which privileged 'masculine' (i.e. objective and scientific knowledge devoid of any emotions on the part of researcher) forms of knowledge.

It has been acknowledged that there is no specific feminist approach to research or methodology. Even though feminist research methods remain largely focused on qualitative research methods since they tend to issues of power and subjugated meaning in research (Finch, 1993; Oakley, 1981).

A view from somewhere—social situatedness of knowledge claims

By adhering to a feminist epistemological framework the aim of the research is to avoid inflicting further exploitation and/or subordination

of individuals through the research. Engaging in a research project with participants of different backgrounds through the research process I needed to ensure that their experiences are adequately represented within the framework that maximises the dialectical nature of research.

Here I attempt to justify my use of feminist methodology by offering a brief account of a concept of strong objectivity as proposed by Harding (2004) since it advocates that both the researcher and participants' knowledge claims are located in space and time. Feminist academic researchers have taken on board issues of difference and endeavoured to develop the theoretical framework which accounts for the reciprocal nature of relationships between feminist researcher and participants (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1991; Stanley & Wise, 1993).

Within the positivist paradigm a subject-object dualism is sustained since it is taken for granted that the researcher is in the position of 'knower'. Placing the researcher and the researched on different planes, feminists argue, mirrors patriarchal culture. In creating a hierarchical structure between the researcher and the researched a process of 'othering' takes place which leads to 'scientific oppression' of all those who do not share the same background as the researcher (Halpin, 1989). As a researcher with a different background to my participants I wanted to make sure that I was representing Bengali female learners' experiences without misrepresenting or 'othering' them. Hesse-Bieber & Yaiser (2004) argue that the authority of the researcher needs to be deconstructed so that participants' role as co-creators of knowledge can be acknowledged. The blending of subject and object roles within the research process means that the social structure of dominance and power can be minimised.

In seeking to develop knowledge with their participants, feminists strive to produce ‘the view from somewhere’ which acknowledges social locatedness of knowledge. As such it is to be contrasted with the ‘view from nowhere’ of the positivist paradigms whereby the social locatedness of the producer of knowledge is not acknowledged (Haraway, 1998a; 1998b). Focusing on how I am positioned in relation to my participants within the research process helps to break down the idea that research is the “view from nowhere.” Haraway (1988: 584) refers to this as the ‘god trick’ since it is ‘that mode of seeing that pretends to offer a vision that is from everywhere and nowhere, equally and fully’. Engaging in the process of strong reflexivity I need to show how my own history and positionality influence all stages of the research from the design of research questions to dissemination of findings. Therefore, from the outset I have acknowledged that the research is determined by my own positioning as a non-Muslim, white other, middle class, middle aged, child-free, teacher-researcher. I have also reflected upon multiple subjectivities I have come to occupy in relation to research for example as a non-native teacher/speaker/student of English, and educational researcher.

Feminism seeks to bypass the subject-object dualism that characterises the positivist paradigm. A dialectic relationship between knower and object of knowledge is advocated by Bhavnani (2004), Harding (2004), Haraway (1988). Feminists discount the possibility of conducting research free of social influence or researcher’s personal beliefs. The fusion of subject and object means acknowledging that the researcher’s claims to knowledge are socially situated as much as those of her participants.

Harding’s (2004) conceptualisation of objectivity means that researchers need to disclose not just how they researched the topic

but also the reasons for engaging in the research. In exposing personal beliefs, values and biases of the researcher, the hierarchical relationship that dominates the positivist paradigm is transcended. By focusing on the researcher's experience and biography, unbiased or less biased accounts of the social world are produced (Harding, 1991). By taking full account of women's experiences in their struggle against oppression, a form of 'truth' can be accessed.

Employing a tool of reflexivity in my research means acknowledging how my social background, assumptions and positionality affect my research. Knowledge is not neutral as maintained in the positivist paradigm or independent of the social paradigm in which it was created. Giving a brief account of my own social location and identity I acknowledge that my claims to knowledge, as much as my participants', are located in time and space. Therefore, being an immigrant to Britain at the age of 18, going to university in 1992, doing a Master's degree in Humanities, embarking upon a teaching career in my late twenties, while negotiating intersections of race, gender and class in my academic, professional and personal life, have been significant markers that have influenced my intellectual concerns and hopes.

Within post-modernist feminist perspectives on research (Opie, 1992; Fawcett, 2000) any claims to absolute truth and objectivity are abandoned as unachievable. Instead it is argued that essentialist accounts of experience are one among many historically specific versions of events. All knowledge claims are products of the society in which they were produced. In accepting that there are multiple truths and multiple realities, any essentialist claims to truth are abandoned. Social location of the researcher and the social construction of knowledge are recognised.

In conducting research with Bengali female learners my aim has been to open up a space for marginalised voices to be brought to the centre. Within the postmodernist feminist framework, the underlying assumption is that the voices heard do not offer an absolute truth. Within the hierarchical society any claims to universal truth need to be discarded. Feminists aim for partial and context bound truths to be accessed through the research. Studying across difference is acknowledging that there are multiple truths and social realities. Starting research from what were traditionally ‘othered’ spaces means taking into account the intersectionality of a variety of characteristics such as race, class gender and sexuality that influence people’s experiences and attitudes (Archer *et al.* 2001; Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Brewster, 1993; Gedalof, 1999; Phoenix, 1994).

Abandoning the positivist view that reality is one-dimensional, there is recognition that other realities and truths are as valuable as those of the researcher. The voices heard are just one of myriad voices that represent socially, historically and culturally generated knowledge. This argument also justifies the legitimacy of my voice. My construction of truth is just one of many ‘truths’. In grounding my research within the post-structuralist framework I forge space for our voices to be heard alongside many other voices in any field that differ from us in age, race, social or religious background and ability.

In this section I have looked at reasons for embracing a feminist methodology for my research. Within the positivist paradigm the social position of the researcher is considered insignificant because such knowledge claims serve androcentric interests. Rational objectivity subsumed in the positivist paradigm implies separation of the researcher as a ‘knower’ and participants. Feminist methodology, by

contrast, emphasizes reflexivity and positioning of the researcher and participants on equal footing. I have also advocated that the research is to be conducted within the post-structuralist framework which acknowledges historical, cultural and social situatedness of voice. Positivism's claims that views from nowhere can be generated are abandoned in favour of situating each subject, including the researcher, within a particular time and place.

Dealing with difference: debating cross-cultural research

In this part I want to write myself into the scene of research to illustrate how my own race, gender and class intersect with those of participants, thus contributing to an understanding of 'the differences your difference makes' (Reay, 1996a:443).

My research will not focus solely on one axis of differentiation such as race, or gender. It will look at the complexity of the interrelationships alongside other axes of differentiation such as age, ethnic background, religious faith, marital background. If I were to solely focus on one axis of differentiation such as race or gender or class as analytical tool I would fail to take into account the intertwining, fluid and shifting nature of these categories. In acknowledging the intertwined nature of these categories I can also account for differential positionings within a multiplicity of power relationships (Archer *et al.* 2002; Bhavnani, 1993; Brah, 1999; Reay, 1994).

Having exposed different arguments in support of racial matching in the section A of this chapter, in this section I want to consider further the extent to which my race, gender and class impacts upon the research. As an outsider in terms of race, age, class, marital status

juxtaposed my sample, I want to explore to what extent I can engage in research with participants who are different to me.

Spivak argues that the feminist researcher must be aware of the power she exercises in granting the voice to the 'subaltern'. Representing the voice of the 'othered' requires the feminist researcher to unlearn privilege to speak to the subaltern, 'rendering delirious that interior voice that is the voice of the other is us' (Spivak, 1994:104). In addressing the ethical dilemma around coming to know 'others' Haw (1996) argues that power differentials should always be at the forefront of the researchers' mind in particular when it comes to the elicitation and interpretation of data from a less powerful group by a more dominant one.

Here I will make use of Brah's (1999) terms such as *ajnabi*, *ghair* and *apna/apni* to bypass binary notions of difference that are inherent in insider/ outsider debate. Brah (1999:19) conceptualises *ajnabi* as 'a stranger; a newcomer whom one does not know yet but who holds a promise of friendship, love and intimacy'. The *ajnabi* may have different ways of doing things but is not 'alien'. She could be (come) *apna*; that is, 'one of our own'. For Brah (1999:19) the idea of *ghair* is more difficult to translate since it 'walks the tightrope between the insider and outsider.' The difference of the *ghair* cannot be fully captured by the dichotomy of Self and Other; nor is it an essentialist category. Yet, it is a form of irreducible, opaque, difference.'

I draw on Brah's conceptualisations and terminology to displace the use of insider and outsider. On the basis of my being of different social and racial background to my participants I first used the notion of outsider to describe my relationship with the participants. Now I feel that Brah's notion of *ajnabi/ghair* would better capture how I was

perceived by Bengali female learners. It was the combination of different axes of differentiation such as my age, ethnicity and lack of marital status that has created boundaries around me. I was aware that the extent to which I was being constructed as a *ghair* by my participants may affect the amount of information participants would be prepared to share with me. Independently of whether I was constructed as *ajnabi* or *ghair* on the basis of my visible signifiers, I found that in an effort to engender trust and co-operation I sought what experiences I had in common with my participants. When talking about participants' experiences of learning English in this country or abroad I shared with them my experiences of learning English as a second language. Having shared experience that we were able to compare meant that participants could to some degree relate to me and share with me, with greater ease, their past experiences even if they were not positive. However, the main reason I drew upon this experience was because I was able to minimise the authority that comes with teaching role.

As my fieldwork progressed I was able to establish various degrees of familiarity with various participants. This may have been down to establishing shared space or recognising differences that we were able to transcend. My unmarried status also set me apart from my participants. My non-English accent was met with polite curiosity. What were initially perceived as barriers became starting points of conversation. Bengali female participants wanted to know why in my late thirties I was still unmarried, if I had a partner or even if I wanted to have any children in the future. Enabling participants to ask me questions diminished the inherent hierarchy of research relationship and allowed me to shift from my initial *ghair/ajnabi* position to that of *apna*.

Being of different background was an advantage to some extent. My race had an impact upon how forthcoming participants were. I learned a surprising amount about the participants, their histories, struggles and their ambitions for future. Some participants in particular felt that they could confide in me about struggles they faced in the domestic field. I was flattered that they would choose to tell me about more intimate aspect of their lives, in particular as I was positioned as a *ghair* in relation to their culture. Whilst it could be argued that some participants felt that they could confide in me because I created a positive environment where they felt comfortable and established positive and reciprocal relationship I feel that they felt that as a member of different ethnic group I was more trusted not to impart any confidential information. Nonetheless, establishing a good relationship was a necessary pre-requisite but I felt that intersection of the race position impacted upon the interview in a surprising way. Reflecting upon the more revealing interviews I have come to conclude that it is that lack of knowing i.e. shared knowledge and understanding that positioned me as an impartial listener who would not judge.

Whilst I may not have an insight into Asian culture to the extent an Asian researcher would have, and therefore may not be able to judge validity of 'truth' claims, in taking a post structural stance I subscribe to the view that there is more than one truth in which we invest ourselves. I was seeking to establish an on-going dialogue with my participants whereby knowledge construction is a process of reciprocal explorations of our worlds; hence I would be able to trace my world through my participants and vice versa or in Reay's (1996a: 443) words 'working towards 'uncovering/recognising the difference your differences make''. What is underlying my approach to the cross-cultural research is that commonalties are far more important than

differences. For this reason, I have chosen not to think of myself as an insider/outsider in the research process.

The value of bypassing binaries inherent in insider/outsider debate is that I, as a white researcher who does not share the background of my participants, am not trapped in this dualistic debate. Attempts to align myself with the category of an insider or outsider reflect dualistic thinking of the Western thought. Setting this research within the post-structural framework I want to distance myself from dualism constructed around the notion of commonalities and differences between researchers and participants and thus pave way for critically examining commonalities and differences inherent in any research relationship.

Francis's (2001) work advocates that different epistemic positions can be forged by different members of a community, thus encouraging a break from boxing the researcher into one-subject identity that would foreclose the cross-cultural research. As I stated earlier, my commitment is to trace 'the other in the self' (Spivak, 1990:30) –thus critically explore the commonalities and differences inherent in any researcher/participant relationship.

Acknowledging that both participants and I occupy different spaces in the research process I need to acknowledge the location from which I speak (Stanley & Wise, 1993; Maynard & Purvis, 1994), ensuring that my interests in research and my values are openly stated within the work (Gill, 1995). What I specifically need to focus on is the 'way in which the gender, race and class position of respondents intersect with those of researcher' (Phoenix, 1994:49). In recognising the interdependence of the researcher/participants subjectivities I need to

be able to critically examine my own background and the reasons for undertaking research.

Thus this study will to some extent shed light on the way in which racialised and gendered interactions between researchers and participants affect knowledge production.

Teaching biography: temporary insider or outsider?

Reflecting upon the insider/outsider debate there were several stages through my fieldwork where I drew upon my temporary insider status in order to negotiate access to fieldwork. It was my teaching history that enabled me to secure access to college and the learning centre. Without teaching contacts I feel that negotiating access to these places would have taken much longer. Even though I offered a somewhat vague description of the project to teachers—something along the lines of exploring learning journeys of Bengali female learners studying ESOL in the college—I was swiftly introduced to the curriculum managers. Having given them the official information sheet about the purpose of research I was invited to visit classes.

Retrospectively I feel that my role as an ESOL teacher enabled me to negotiate access to participants. As a first time researcher I was acutely aware that I was solely dependent upon teachers and managers, as gatekeepers, for access to the participants.

My teaching biography also granted me an insider status with other ESOL teachers at the college. The sense of ‘we are in all in it together’ pervaded my interviews with the staff since we had a shared understanding about demands of the job. However, arranging interviews with the staff was imbued with difficulties. Due to time constraints and exam schedules I had to delay my interviews with the

teaching staff until the beginning of the next semester, thus effectively extending my field work.

Although my teaching history was an advantage in negotiating access, it was an aspect of my identity I tried to downplay in my interviews with participants. I was aware how respectful some Bengali female students were of their teachers and I did not want students to feel they had to take part in research. As students of English there was also a danger that Bengali female learners may perceive interviews as a language exercise. This fear was compounded during my first visit to the college when I was introduced as a fellow teacher to potential participants. Before I even managed to tell students more about the project as a way of introduction, students asked me if I was teaching ESOL at the college. Hence while my teaching biography opened up doors for me to do the research, it had placed me in the position of 'authority' with ESOL students. However, my explanation as to what I was hoping to do was met with total indifference. I left the site feeling despondent. I could not help but think that my teaching background alienated students from participating. However, it was too late. Over the next few weeks I would pop into the class and tell potential participants where I was in case anybody wanted to speak to me after the class. It took six preliminary visits to the college over the period of two months before I recruited any participants for the research. I found that I was more successful in recruiting participants if I scheduled interviews for the same day.

My teaching biography lent me a status of temporary insider with teaching staff and management. However, it constructed me as an 'outsider' in eyes of potential participants. Whilst I interpreted participants' initial unwillingness to participate in a project to my teaching biography, it did not occur to me that other visible signifiers

of difference such as my background, origin, appearance, age, education and/or marital status could have impacted upon their initial hesitation to get involved with the project. In the next section I explore how 'race' and gender between the researcher and participants interact in an unpredictable manner, drawing upon some examples from my fieldwork.

Reciprocal nature of research: powerless or empowered?

Acknowledging the reciprocal nature of the relationships between myself and my participants in the next section I explore the power inherent within the research process. Here I will also resort to my research diary to recount some more memorable events which illustrate the shifting nature of power in the research process.

Feminists have long debated how to surpass the hierarchical nature of research which dominated the positivist paradigm. Within the positivist paradigm the researcher was encouraged to maintain an objective distance from his object of study. Feminists have questioned claims to objective and value-free research and have endeavoured to explore how relationships of power between researchers and their participants determine interpretation and representation of knowledge (Hartsock, 1987; Haraway, 1991; Harding, 1991; Code, 1996).

Oakley's (1981) goal of conducting non-hierarchical interviews was challenged in the 1990s. It was recognised that power differentials could not be equalised between women. In conducting research with participants from poorer countries Patai (1991) claims that such research is not only hierarchical but also unethical. Being from a different background to my participants and a first time researcher I was also concerned that there was an inherent danger of turning

subjects of my research into objects, thus reproducing the positivist paradigm. Walkerdine (1986) draws analogy between the researcher's power to objectify the subject of her research and traditional, masculine, middle class gaze that has represented a 'God's Eye' perspective (Smith & Heshusius, 1986). Situating myself and my knowledge claims into my research means that my construction of knowledge is influenced by my cultural, historical and social location (Harding, 1986). Thus, I need to acknowledge limitation of my research since it only offers a partial perspective.

One-to-one interviews lasting approximately an hour were chosen as a main research instrument. There are several reasons as to why I chose semi-structured interviews. In her much-cited 1981 article, Oakley provided specific recommendations for how feminist interviewing might be undertaken: establishing non-hierarchical relationship with participants through the researcher's investment of her own personal identity has become a cornerstone of feminist interviewing (Mies, 1983; Rheinartz, 1992; Stanley & Wise, 1983). Therefore, semi-structured interviews are particularly suited for promoting an egalitarian relationship and inviting participants to engage in collaborative relationship with the researcher. Doing my second round of interviews in November 2012 I decided to replace them with life stories as by then I was aware how constricting one-to-one interviews were.

Some researchers have argued that open-ended interviews may be more exploitative than previously thought. Claims that feminist interviews promote egalitarian relationships have been problematized by researchers such as Lather (1988) and Francis (2003) since the researcher is in the position to gain most out of the interview situation (i.e. research data necessary for the academic advancement) and can

walk away from it without any care for the participants. Taking into account that power relations between researcher and participants cannot entirely be eliminated, there is a danger that changes in feminist methodology may have unintentionally reintroduced the positivist paradigm they have been trying to challenge.

Stacey (1991) in particular brought to attention inherent dangers in taking the stance that interviews could be beneficial for both researchers and participants. Finch (1993: 173) similarly drew attention to dangers of pretending that interviews can be mutually beneficial for both parties, writing that 'my participants need to know how to protect themselves from people like me'.

Cotterrill highlighted:

potentially damaging effects of a research technique which encourage friendship in order to focus on very private and personal aspects of their lives'. (1992: 597)

Such views on interviews paint a researcher as the one who ultimately benefits from the interview in exploiting participants. Moreover, if the participants are of poorer socio-economic origin, interviews are hierarchical as well as exploitative (Patai, 1991).

I chose life history method as a preferred method for my follow up interviews since I felt that this method would give participants greater control than semi-structured interviews. It also acknowledges participants' agency as participants were able to choose the order of themes by sticking prompt cards on timelines and add any additional themes if necessary, thus addressing power differentials between researcher and participants. Since the aim of the research is to offer alternative readings of Asian femininities, life history methods are

employed as a preferred vehicle through which the process of deconstruction of hegemonic discourse of Asian femininities can take place (Middleton, 1992). However, Andrews (2002) argues that life history methods can be constructed as even more exploitative since participants may find themselves in the position where they reveal more than they anticipated, therefore placing the researcher in the ultimate position of power. The use of life history methods, therefore, demands utmost reflexivity and sensitivity on the part of the researcher to eliminate any possibilities of exploitation.

Engaging in a research with participants from socio- economically less privileged background I did not want to reproduce the oppression of the wider society through my interviews (Patai, 1991). Coupled with that was my concern whether I will be able to break down inherently hierarchical teacher/ student binary.

Through my own experience of teaching Bengali female learners English, I am aware that these learners are traditionally very respectful of their teachers. Many Bengali female learners come from an educational background where language learning was reduced to memorization of key grammatical structure and not deep learning which would enable them to use the language forms to communicate effectively. This is usually accompanied with the great respect for the teacher which they tend to carry over into their new English classes.

My own experience of teaching English has taught me that the only way that passive knowledge of English can be exploited and transformed into active knowledge is if the subject/object /teacher/ student relationship is unsettled. Taking into consideration Patai and Finch's argument about how women from poorer-socio economic backgrounds may be exploited through research I want to make sure that as a researcher, (often from a different socio-economic

background to my participants) I do not misrepresent these women or deny their agency.

Here I want to distance myself from the assumption that the researcher and participants occupy fixed positions of power due to their positions within specific gender, class or racial hierarchies. Despite the view that the researcher is in the position of power since he/she is the one asking the questions, here I posit that power oscillates between the researcher and participants at all stages of research. Foucault (1980) argues that power is something which can be used and deployed by particular people in specific situations, which itself will produce other reactions and resistances. In arguing that power is not in the locum of dominant parties (i.e. specific groups or identities), Foucault's conceptualisations are in opposition to structuralist models which argue that power was held exclusively by dominant groups in society. Taking into account the shifting nature of power there were times when I felt that I was in less powerful positions.

Adhering to feminist emancipatory goals of my research I wanted to make sure that participants felt empowered through the research process and took part in it because they consented and at times most convenient to them. To make sure that the students I targeted for research did not feel obliged to partake in research I organised interviews outside class time.

Nevertheless, there were numerous occasions when I would walk away from the field without any data because participants were not interested in doing interviews. One of the more memorable incidents was organising interviews around Christmas time. I was reprimanded for it by one of the potential participants because it was Christmas

time and 'surely I've got lot of shopping to do'. This encounter illustrates interactions of race and religions between researcher and participants. In the eyes of my potential participant I was essentialised as a white, potentially married woman of religious background who should dedicate herself to festive customs of Christmas shopping in the month of December. The potential participant succumbed to stereotypical understanding of my whiteness. Bhabha (1994) argues that stereotypes aim to fix the meaning of the racially different 'other'. Thus upon entering the field there was a degree of essentialism by both myself, as a white other researcher, and by some of the Bengali female participants. Throughout the research process as my position shifted from the *ghair* to *apna* so the stereotypical understanding and knowledge of each other's culture was dismantled as both participants and I engage in meaningful interactions.

However, it wasn't always the case that participants were not interested in research or unwilling to take part in it. Even though some of the participants were unapologetic about not turning up at the interview, they still insisted upon being interviewed later on. On other occasions participants would not turn up and I was left sitting in the room waiting for them, feeling totally disheartened and powerless. Some of the potential participants even though they initially expressed an interest in a project later on completely withdrew from the project. Due to lack of contact I was not able to find out reasons for withdrawal. I assumed that it was just a lack of interest.

Bengali female participants also exercised control over what aspects of interviews should be taped. Inevitably some sensitive issues arose during the course of interviews. One of the newly arrived participants opened up to me about being ostracized by both her family in Bangladesh and the UK for marrying out of her religion. As a result,

she felt increasingly isolated in this country as she did not feel she could speak to any other students on the course as ‘they would not understand’. Moreover, as her husband was only on a student visa (due for a renewal) she needed urgent immigration advice. In this case I switched off the tape and abandoned the interview. As she was still interested in doing the interview we rearranged.

Oakley (1981) suggests that researchers should support their participants with any information or knowledge that may be of value to participants. In this case I helped the participant with details of some agencies that could help her deal with the immigration status. Whilst the majority of Bengali female participants did not object to being taped, there was an instance when a participant asked me after the interview to give her a copy of the transcript. She stated that the reason for it was to see how good her English was. When I interviewed her I had a feeling that she was very concerned not to say anything personal or too revealing, so when she made this request it crossed my mind that she was concerned about something she said to me. Research ethics guidelines state that transcripts should be made available to all participants (BERA). Sharing transcripts with participants, involving participants in all stages of research is driven by feminist ideals of participant “ownership” of the transcription and empowerment. Bhavnani (1993) argues that the key task of feminist methodology is not to recast the participants in a position of powerlessness. In giving voice to women’s experiences which have been silenced, a collaborative nature of research is advocated, whereby a researcher and participants are placed on the same level (Bhavnani, 1993; Holland & Ramazanoglu, 1994). With this in mind participants can be involved in all stages of research and invited to collaborate in writing up the final thesis (Kirsch, 1999). I found that

showing participants transcripts was fruitful in achieving research objectives and enabling participants to reflect on the interview.

Kirsch (1999) warns of dangers of participants revealing information against their better judgement in a supportive environment where they feel valued. This is what happened when another participant who left an abusive marriage asked me to switch off the tape so she could talk to me more openly about the full extent of the mental abuse she suffered at the hands of her husband. Whilst I felt to some extent privileged that a participant wanted to share this personal information to me, I did not feel equipped to deal with it. However, I felt that I had to give her that space to talk about what was a traumatic experience for her. Osgood (2010) highlights the tensions and ambiguities that come to characterise life history methods of research and their potential conflation with life history. To dispute the notion that giving voice to marginalised groups can be 'unethical', arrogant and partial, Osgood (2010) argues that researchers need to acknowledge difference, problematise reciprocity and question the power differentials in research situations. Skeggs (1997:81) writes that time spent counselling rather than researching remains an ethical dilemma of feminist research. Even though it may have risked my research to some extent- I chose not to take notes of it- I felt that in talking about her past the participant was able to reflect on it and reevaluate her strategies for future. I felt that it was a participant's choice to disclose a personal account of difficult time in her life. Participants retain some control over their interviews since they choose what experiences they want to share and which ones they want to withhold.

At the end of the interview participants were invited to raise any questions. I wanted to engage in what Oakley referred to as 'interactive interviews' which were open-ended and beneficial for my

participants. Oakley (1981) believes that participants should be given an opportunity to ask questions at the end since it addresses to some extent power imbalance in the research process and minimizes objectification of participants as data. Even though I was the one who would most benefit from the interviews by collecting data at the end of the interview I wanted to empower participants through participation in interviews and encourage them to reflect upon their experiences; many took the opportunity to do that. Some of the questions were directly related to my own personal life. Bengali participants wanted to know where I lived, why I was still unmarried, if I had any children or a partner. Other participants were interested to know more about the project, and why I chose to research with Bengali participants. Retrospectively I feel that these participants felt free to ask questions because we were able to establish good working relationship based on trust.

Giving an opportunity to participants to ask questions also served to some end to establish a friendly relationship with participants and make it less exploitative. It not only served to put participants and me on an equal footing but it also illustrated that an interview is a two-way process; not just a one-way process of the positivist paradigm, where participants answered set questions and a researcher recorded them without providing any input.

In retrospect, I have come to view these incidents as recognition of the reciprocal nature of research. Upon entering the field, I was concerned not to objectify the participants and establish non-hierarchical relationship from the start. Whilst now I realise that such presumption would be quite naïve since there is some degree of hierarchy in every interview, the instances just recounted illustrate the extent to which participants were able to control the research.

These were instances where participants clearly exercised their agency and resisted, subverted and challenged discursive constructions that cast Bengali women as passive. Bengali female participants chose whether to participate in the interviews, what to reveal or withhold in interviews, negotiated their interview schedules, chose whether to be taped or not, asked questions at the end of interviews, withdrew from research without any overt explanations, raised discussions topics and asked for support with matters that were not necessarily part of interviews. Power relations that arose during interviews illustrate the dynamic nature of power.

Moreover, these instances also illustrate the collaborative nature of the research process since the success of my field work was entirely dependent upon participants' full participation. However, that is not to say that I, as a researcher, do not remain in charge of the research project. Despite feeling powerless at times when participants did not choose to participate in a project, I have initiated the research topic, chosen the research site, interpreted the findings and will disseminate the research.

Taking into account my fieldwork experience I have come to view that interviews are not exploitative methods (Stacey, 1991; Patai, 1991). The view would construct participants as victims. Participants who took part in my interviews were not victimised in the research process. As I have recounted Bengali women in my study were able to refuse participation in the interviews. Those Bengali women who agreed to participate in the research were able to negotiate their own terms of participation.

Moreover, the nature of the research I advocate is that it should be inherently participant-led when it comes to negotiating times of

interviews. Participants felt empowered in contributing to study and were pleased that their views and opinions of ESOL education were sought. What initially started as a general view of education throughout the course of interview became a personal account of their life in Britain. As a result of interviews nearly every participant in the study reflected and evaluated upon their life so far, in the process making decisions and plans for future.

By agreeing to take part in the research Bengali women opened up a space to talk about their experiences of learning English within the current employability based focus of ESOL provision, thus opening up a space that has largely been marginalised in the ESOL literature. In opening up a space from the margins and gaining ‘a view from below’ (hooks, 1984) Bengali women’s experiences of ESOL education are brought to the centre. The margin is a powerful place from which current passive construction of female Bengali learners as passive ‘inactive’ recipients of ESOL policy can be challenged and transformed.

Summary of Section B

In this section I have justified the use of a feminist methodology for my research with Bengali female participants. Feminist methodology takes women’s lives as a starting point and places the researcher on the same plane of knowledge as participants (Harding, 1991). Situating my study within a poststructuralist feminist framework, I have also explored differences and commonalities between my participants and me, which is of key importance to poststructuralist feminists (Reay, 2001; Archer, *et al.* 2002; Francis & Archer, 2004). Reflecting on the insider/outsider debate I have argued against an ‘identity politics’ approach which advocates matching (Yuval-Davis, 1994; Phoenix,

1994; and Archer, 2002) since such an approach claims that some characteristics are more important than others. Acknowledging multi-dimensional power differentials between my participants and myself, I have argued that my participants were able to exercise agency in the research process, therefore Bengali women in this study challenged the construction of South Asian women as marginalised and ‘othered’ throughout the research process.

Section C: theoretical framework

In the final section of this chapter I turn my attention to the use of theoretical concepts underpinning this study. In introducing the genesis of the postcolonial framework I aim to justify its use. As an overarching theoretical perspective it guides my approach to fieldwork, data analysis and the production of knowledge. In this section I also justify the use of Foucault’s analysis of power as a significant theoretical lens that facilitates the production of alternative forms of knowledge. In the final section of this chapter I set out what I aim to do by employing Foucault’s notion of power: through the analysis of the data my study is committed to creating a third place within which Bengali women’s subjective experiences of education which can provide an alternative model of knowledge. I first turn my attention to the use of life history methods.

Life history methods

In this section I justify my use of life history methods to conduct research with Bengali female participants at both sites of research. As outlined in the appendix themes covered in semi-structured interviews and life histories include participants’ previous levels of education,

employment, experiences of learning English in Bangladesh and the UK, reasons for studying English and hopes and aspirations for future.

I chose semi-structured, one-to-one life-history interviews with Bengali female learners at approximately 45-60 minutes in length. I have used the life history method to reach beyond pathologised conceptions of South Asian identity (Brah, 1996; Shain, 2000; 2003). Unlike interviews which allow the researcher to organise participants' lived experiences into neatly fragmented codes, life history methods privilege participants' way of organising meaning in their lives (De Vault, 1999), thus acknowledging participants' agency. To enable participants to gain some control over the interviews I provided participants with a timeline and a set of stickers. To give some structure to the interviews and to ensure that key themes were covered an additional set of stickers was provided so that participants could post a set of stickers on the timeline to show important events in participants' lives, such as arrival to the UK, marriage, motherhood and etc. Participants were given additional blank stickers, and encouraged to comment on events that were important to them.

Life histories are invaluable as a feminist method because they provide a means of evaluating the past in order to make sense of the self (Lawler, 2008). My aim is to gain understandings of how hegemonic discourses of passivity impact upon Bengali women's understanding of the self and how ESOL classes are used as a vehicle through which alternative identities might be articulated.

My study aims to dismantle passive constructions of South Asian femininity and open alternative spaces. It seeks to contextualise experiences of Bengali female learners of education within the wider socio-economic factors and acknowledge the role of colonialism and

imperialism in the passive construction of South Asian femininity. It recognises that the reality of Bengali women's lives is informed by their socio-cultural histories and personal experiences related to intersections of race, gender and class (Brewster, 1993; Collins, 2000).

Life history methods serve as a vehicle through which counter-narratives as expressions of alternative definitions and meanings can be constructed (Andrews, 2002). Presenting Bengali women's experiences of education through the use of life history, counter narratives of resistance and individual agency can be unearthed. In addition, life history as a method combines macro history (e.g. the post 9/11 conceptualisation of Asian women wearing the veil) and micro history (e.g. personal events such as having a baby) to show how they converge and impact upon the person's transition through time and space. Through the life history method we can, therefore, recognise complexity of women's lives, 'we can appreciate the 'particular' within the 'universal' and the 'universal' within the 'particular' (Brah, 1996:93).

Taking into account post-structuralist conceptualisation of identity as always 'in the process of becoming' (Alexander, 1996) life history methods provide an insight into the dialectical relationship between the individual and a society, enabling individuals to make sense of their positioning within and through hegemonic discourses (Andrews, 2002). Middleton (1992) argues that life history promotes the collaborative nature of knowledge construction since it invites participants to contribute to a body of knowledge that has been silenced or marginalised (Harding, 1987; hooks, 2000). Life history method is an effective tool in giving voice to the voiceless. In Geiger's words:

the narrative method of collecting people's 'life histories' is not only seen as a way of developing participatory research, but is a method that enables the discovering of the social experiences of 'silenced women' (or other silenced groups) (1985:335)

It celebrates the interdependence of researcher/participants' subjectivities since life history is 'a process of deconstructing the discursive practices through which one's subjectivity has been constituted' (Middleton, 1992: 20). Deconstructing the passive stereotypes assigned to Bengali women in education means creating an alternative space through which the women's narrative can be heard. Considering that the process of deconstruction is set within the post-structuralist framework, Lather (1988) unsettles the notion of authoritative accounts that researchers can gain in 'giving voice' to participants. Authoritative accounts would imply that the self is stable and not a continuously changing subject where there is no core self (Weedon, 1987).

To conclude, the use of life history methods is advocated here since they enable Bengali women to make sense of their lives and promote the collaborative nature of research with participants; they are invaluable since they provide alternative models of knowledge from those who have been hidden/marginalised (Harding, 1987; hooks, 2000).

Convergence of post colonialism and black feminist discourses

In gaining a view from below (hooks 1984) I draw upon the convergence of postcolonial and black feminist discourse to show how knowledge is produced from what has been constructed as a margin. Foucault (1980:82-85) argued that 'it is through the reappearance of

‘subjugated knowledge’.... that criticism performs its work’. In Foucault’s view subjugated knowledges are:

a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated; naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity (1980:82–85)

Post-colonialism, alongside post-structuralist and post-modern discourses has made a significant contribution to knowledge development (Hickson & Holmes, 1994). In drawing upon the post-colonial discourse as a discourse that privileges the voice of the colonised, a notion that there is a universal standpoint on knowledge development is challenged.

Here I focus on the concepts most pertinent to my research with Bengali female learners in the field of ESOL; namely the conceptualisation of race, notion of the ‘Other’, fluid identities and hybrid culture within specific historical and colonial contexts. The notion of ‘Other’ refers to supposedly inferior people or nation.

What is at the forefront of the post-colonial debates is who has the right to create knowledge. Bhabha has argued that:

a range of contemporary critical theories suggests that it is from those who have suffered the sentence of history-subjugation, domination, diaspora, displacement – that we learn our most enduring lesson for living and thinking (1994:172).

A post-colonial feminist perspective provides a theoretical lens for uncovering the process of colonisation that has determined the

construction of gendered and racialised identities. Such a perspective acknowledges that voices that have been marginalised through colonisation need to be brought to the centre (Bhabha, 1994; Hall, 1996; Spivak, 1998). Drawing on Bengali female learners' experiences of ESOL education such a perspective brings to the forefront the voices that have been marginalised. It empowers marginalised voices that have been constructed as passive recipients of the policy to shed light on their experiences of the current ESOL curricula, thus enabling them to impact upon the policy and contest their construction within the current policy.

What is a post-colonialist perspective?

The term post-colonialism is problematic in itself as it does not refer to any specific period of colonisation. Different disciplinary perspectives and scholarship offer their own definitions of the term. Quayson (2000:25) sees post-colonialism as a process of continued struggle 'to transcend the effects of colonialism through an engaged and situated practice'. Both colonising and colonised societies are engaged in a struggle. However, such struggle is not one of binary opposites (Hall, 1996).

Post-colonialism as much as post-modernism represents a departure from a unified school of thought. What remains at the centre of post-colonial discourse is that it does not place colonising and colonised in the relationship of binary opposition. In refusing to engage in the politics of binary oppositions and of creating differences, 'of 'here' and 'there', 'then' and 'now', 'home' and 'abroad' (Hall, 1996: 247), post-colonial theories illuminate the processes by which the binary constructions of concepts such as race, ethnicity or culture place non-European people as the essentialised, inferior, subordinate Other

(Mohanty, 2003; Narayan, 2000). The effect of 'othering' 'can still be seen in the language, theoretical models and hidden assumptions of modern sociology itself' (Hall, 1992 :318). Such discourses are evoked to legitimate colonial domination (Mohanty, 1988).

Within the post-colonial framework the fluidity of identities and the construction of new identities within hybrid cultural spaces is explored (Bhabha, 1994; Brah, 1999; Hall, 1996). Bhabha's notion of hybridity (1994; 1995; 1998) views merging of metropolis and colony or coloniser/colonised as a process of negotiation that surpasses the dualism; cultures are never unitary in themselves, nor simply dualistic in relation of Self to Other' Bhabha (1995:207). The creation of new space within which the culture is perceived as ambiguous, partial and fluid is what Bhabha refers to as hybridity and 'The Third Space'.

Bhabha argues that 'the process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new era of negotiation of meaning and representation' (Bhabha, 1990: 211).

Within the third space the hierarchies of cultures are transcended, the notions of pure culture abandoned and notions of binary oppositions surpassed. This fluid and dynamic view of culture opposes a culturalist perspective that sees culture as static and incapable of change. Moreover, it challenges the culturalist perspective that the behaviour of 'the Other' is influenced by their social characteristics. Within culturalist and racialising discourses people have been classed into generalising, essentialising discourses where hierarchical categories of superiority and inferiority have been assigned to them (Bhavnani, 1997).

Incorporation of such conceptualisations of culture and race into the study illuminates historical and social processes that have had an

effect on the way in which culture has been constructed as static beliefs in time and passed on from one generation to the next. Within essentialising culturalist discourses an Asian culture of which women are victims is presented as static in comparison with the Western culture (Shain, 2001; Brah, 1992; 1996). The shifts in cultural spaces that have taken place through colonisation, diaspora and displacement reveal that creation of new space is imbued with relations of power, subjugation and domination.

What makes post-colonial discourse pertinent to my study is that it provides an alternative framework within which voices of those who have been constructed as 'Other' and marginalised by history can be heard. The colonised here are actively engaged in the process of negotiation and act of resistance. It is this possibility of resistance that opens up a new transformative space that is of particular interest for my study. Assigning the colonised an active role in the process of transformation opens up a space for my participants to negotiate their own experiences of education.

Whilst a post-colonial framework provides a valuable theoretical lens for gaining an insight into alternative conceptualisation of race, culture and identity what is lacking is a gender analysis (Mohanty, 2003; Narayan & Harding, 2000; Rajan, 1993). With a view of creating a theoretical perspective of post-colonial feminism (PCF) black feminists have converged post-colonial and feminist discourses (Brewer, 1993; Carby, 1982; Collins, 1990; hooks, 1984). Within such a framework binary notions are challenged and a new conceptual framework generated within which complex social relations, including gender analysis could be explored in depth. The fusion of post-colonial and black scholarship creates a theoretical perspective that acknowledges the need for all the marginalised voices that have

historically been suppressed to be heard. The incorporation of black feminism into post-colonial scholarship means that gender is now placed at the centre of any such analysis.

Here I commit to the use of the term black as it is defined in black feminism. The term black is employed not as a biological category. It has been constructed as a political category for people who have been constructed as the 'Other' and inferior through the process of colonisation (Ahmad, 1993). The term black, therefore, is not used only for people of African descent. To surpass the use of government's divisive terms such as 'black' or 'Asian' the term incorporates all non-white population including the third world women in Britain (Bannerji, 2000).

Black feminism and intersectionality

In this section I turn my attention to the central preoccupation of black feminism that offers a helpful starting point for understanding the largely unexplored point of marginalization of Bengali female learners within the field of ESOL education.

Black feminism is pertinent to my study because it is produced by black women who have experienced racism and oppression. Whilst there is an underlying assumption that there are certain commonalities shared by black women as a group, it is the diversity within the group in terms of their class, age, religion, caste and sexual orientation that has brought a paradigmatic shift towards intersectional analysis.

During the 1980s, the second wave feminists focused on issues of difference between women. Whilst there have been attempts to expose the social relationships that organise experience along the

axes of differentiation such as race, class and gender, much of theorising has been couched within the western tradition and from a particular social position, namely white middle class. Such theorising accounts did not seem adequate as an explanatory resource that would speak more directly to the lives of black women. Black feminist critique argued that hegemonic and white feminist theory and practice was not relevant to the needs of black women whose experiences considerably differed from those of privileged white middle class women both culturally and racially (Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1983; Carby, 1982; Collins, 1990; the Combahee River Collective, 1982; hooks 1981; Bhavnani & Phoenix, 1994; Maynard, 1996).

An intersecting analysis inclusive of gender, class and other social relations has brought attention to the problems of binary thinking such as black/white; man/woman, where man becomes defined in relation to its other 'woman'. Black feminism provides 'the understanding of race, class and gender as simultaneous' (Brewer, 1993:16). Most importantly such an approach to intersectional analysis takes into account wider societal factors that have contributed to marginalisation of black groups.

In addressing class and race relations a new analytic space was opened up that would illuminate the social relations of domination and oppression and how they function within different axes of differentiation. (Brewer, 1993; Collins, 1990). It is in this space that I place my study on Bengali women's experiences of ESOL education, therefore exploring their experiences within the wider social-political-economic and historical context.

Collins and Brewer provide a paradigmatic shift which illustrates the extent to which racialised, classed and gendered identities, among

other axes of differentiation, determine the social and material conditions of people's lives. Thus an intersectional line of inquiry has brought attention to the social life at the margins. The social life which was hitherto hidden was made visible by bringing voices from the margins to the discourse at the centre (hooks, 1984).

Collins (1990) places great emphasis on the central tenant of black feminism: it is grounded in everyday experiences of black women and written from their perspective. What is intrinsic to this approach is the emphasis on inclusivity of black women's voices; experiences of women from inside and outside the academy are included in this analysis.

In the following section I look at the way of merging the black feminism with the post-colonial perspective.

Post-colonial feminist perspectives

Within the post-colonial framework, the historical construction of the racialised and cultural 'Other' can be challenged. Black feminists advocate the need for an intersectional analysis of race, class and gender from different social and political locations (Bannerji, 1995; 2000; Brewer, 1993; Collins, 1990; hooks, 1984). Those who have been subjugated through the process of colonisation i.e. voices from the margins, generate knowledge that can bring the current discourse about race, class and gender into dispute. hooks (1984) invites us to look at life from the margins since differences in lived realities between black and white women cannot be transcended; from these places different claims to truth can be forged.

Collins (1990) argues that traditional epistemological quests for 'truth' need to be abandoned if we are to go down the path of Black feminist thought. Black women's claims to knowledge were considered anomalies by the dominant class. As a result of colonialism and imperialism black women have experience of oppression and experience a different reality to that of the dominant groups. Experience of oppression enables them to forge a unique standpoint that may resist oppression. However, the assumption that all black women are the same would discount the social class variations amongst black groups. Advocating an intersectional approach to analysis Collins argues that binaries in respect of either/or need to be abandoned in favour of both/and with respect to race, gender and class.

Within the post-colonial and black feminist framework dominant discourses can be contested and new perspectives on knowledge production that embrace multiple social locations promoted. What this entails is recognising voices from the margins as legitimate sources of knowledge.

The merging of post-colonial scholarship and black feminism generates a theoretical perspective for the analysis of gender, race, class as a simultaneous process that is contextualised within the wider socio-economic circumstances. What underlines this approach is the conceptualisation of race and culture. To gain an understanding into how relations of domination and subordination are generated and regenerated means acknowledging structural inequalities that are by-product of processes of colonisation and imperialism.

Conceptualisation of culture as dynamic and fluid rather than static challenges essentialist accounts that have been made to support static

representations of Asians communities as incapable of change (Amos & Parmar, 1981; Brah & Minhas, 1985; Parmar, 1988). Such interpretations of culture serve to hide ideological, economic and political conditions that have contributed to subordination of black groups.

Conceptualisation of race, within this approach, is not benign. It creates differences in lived realities of black women since black women, as subordinate group, experience different reality than dominant groups. Their inequality in power results in unequal access to opportunities in various spheres such as education, employment and housing.

Grounding analysis in Bengali female learners' experiences of ESOL education and contextualising them within a broader historical and social framework, the aim is to make visible the intersecting factors such as class, race and gender that shape their lives. In an effort to gain understanding of Bengali female learners' narratives in terms of class, race, gender contextualised within the post-colonial feminist framework, I, as a white researcher, need to be aware of my own socio-economic positioning and the way in which it contributes to production of knowledge. I turn my attention to this in the next section.

Engaging with post-colonial discourse offers a way of interrupting dichotomous notions of difference through essentialising, culturalist and racialist discourses that have placed people into racial categories and hierarchies. These categories are imbued with notions of superiority and inferiority of what has become known as West v Rest discourse (Hall, 1996). Within the post-colonial framework fixed notions of race and culture claims can be challenged, contested and

transformed. It provides an insight into the way in which race and racialisation are socially constructed through historical, socio-economic and political process of colonisation and imperialism. Acknowledging that the construction of South Asian women as passive is rooted in imperialism and colonialism, post-colonial discourse provides a powerful theoretical lens from which such constructions of South Asian women can be contested.

Why Foucault?

My study aims to contribute to non-hegemonic reading of Bengali female identities and aims to identify practices/strategies Bengali women employ to unsettle dominant discourses. Taking into account that women's experiences of education are influenced by women's positioning in discourses of race, gender and class, the intersectional approach to analysis traces the interplay of various discourses (Archer *et al.* Francis, 2001).

Foucault's analysis of power rejects a notion of fixed and transcendental power and instead alludes to multiple functions of power. In Foucault's words:

what makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse (1980:199)

The fluid nature of power provides a significant theoretical lens that accounts for the freedom and agency of people and the way in which individuals can negotiate different subject positions within the various discourses they are simultaneously both subject and object of

(Foucault, 1980). For Foucault power is a positive, productive force which facilitates production of alternative forms of knowledge.

Foucault's deployment of power as productive and fluid highlights how the subject is constructed through discourses. For Foucault (1972) discourses are reinforced by structures and social institutions.

Discourses consist of groups of related statements which establish the 'truth' at particular moments. It is through discourses that meaning and human subjects are constituted and power relations are established, maintained, challenged, negotiated, subverted and transformed.

Therefore, individuals can negotiate different subject positions within socially determined and relational discourses.

Foucault's conceptualisation of subjects presents a departure from essentialist reading of the stable, coherent 'self'. Abandoning the notion that the self is ever stable but is responsive to particular situations and conditions, such a conceptualisation highlights the extent to which individuals exert a degree of autonomy in determining their own conditions of existence.

Foucault employs the notion of discourse to uncover the structures, rules and procedures which aim to represent normative ideas and thereby place restrictions upon what can and cannot be said. The result is that an individual cannot be objectively positioned outside the discourse without constitutively being positioned by it. Our lives are constitutive of a web of fluid and continuously shifting discourses which are interrelated through the webs. An individual is discursively positioned in relation to these competing discourses and within each discourse an individual can be positioned in a number of ways. It is this discursive positioning of an individual that allows space for negotiation and transformation, 'a field of possible options' (Foucault,

1972:66). It is within this space that I locate my study; the space within which certain possibilities for transformation /resistance emerge.

Engaging in cross-cultural research, where both participants and I speak from a particular culture, a particular religion, a particular experience that constitute our subjectivity, Foucault's notion of power allows for both participants and researcher to be placed on the same theoretical plane. Both researcher and participants' active role in the production of meaning is acknowledged within Foucault's notion of power where the focus is on how we are constituted as subjects of our own knowledge.

Within the methodology chapter I have argued that as a white researcher I need to engage in a critical exploration of the reasons for doing research with participants of different backgrounds and hold on to commonalities I have with participants. Foucault's notion of discourse, discursive positioning, non-monolithic nature of power and fluid nature of identity open up space to critically explore commonalities and differences inherent in any research relationship. It is through discourse that both I and Bengali participants are both subject of and subjected to that I explore the way in which we connect with discourses, and in the process of writing up this study critically examine, review and transform dominant discourses that come to inflect Bengali women's educational experiences and subjectivities.

In particular, the notion of power I aim to employ in the reading of Bengali women's narratives is that of power which promotes particular types of knowledge and particular types of subjects. The issues of power are key to critical analysis of passivity that is assigned to South

Asian femininity since the category of resistance is closely linked to the notion of productive power:

there are no relations of power without resistances; the latter are all the more real and effective because they are formed right at the point where the relations of power are exercised
(Foucault, 1982:142).

Therefore, the very creation of a discourse of passivity serves to create a counter discourse that serves to offer alternative forms of knowledge. The female body that has been characterised as the passive victim of ‘oppressive’ Asian culture (Brah, 1996) can also be a source of resistance to this mode of domination. The way in which this resistance is manifested is best captured through the practices of the self (Foucault, 1980).

I aim to identify non- hegemonic practices, behaviours that are generated through Bengali women’s counter narratives and discourses that refute the traditional, culturalist approaches that reify and homogenise unitary ethnic cultures and identities. In the following section I review the aim of the study and delve into an analysis of the data that signals the emergence of counter discourses which offer a non-hegemonic reading of Bengali female subjectivities.

Third space: beyond traditional, culturalist approaches

Acknowledging Bengali women’s agency as active producers of meaning, an analysis of Bengali women’s subjective experiences of education can provide an alternative model of knowledge that represents Bengali women as subject rather than object of knowledge. As the productive effects of power circulate through the everyday

practices of Bengali women, I look to the data and analyse power relations to illustrate how Bengali women themselves are vehicles of power via their practices of the self (Foucault, 1980). As Foucault (1980:93) argues ‘power is everywhere, not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere’.

Analysing social, cultural and material practices of Bengali women I aim to identify those practices that disrupt or subvert relations of power and advance alternative/subjugated form of knowledge. Within white academic, media and policy discourses a particular type of knowledge about Bengali women is reproduced whereby the family is presented as the main reason/source of oppression rather than racial, social and class inequalities (Ahmad, 2003; Brah, 1992; 1996; Shain, 2003).

This study is committed to creating a ‘third space’ within which Bengali female participants can resist particular interrelations of passivity or even forge new positions for themselves within the existing discourses (Hall, 1992; Khan, 1998; Gilroy, 1992; Spivak, 1999). Although South Asian women have been constructed as passive victims of culture in popular contemporary and academic discourses, women can transform and challenge rather than reproduce the theories of ‘ethnic’ identity as essentialised or homogenised experiences.

I make use of Foucault’s (Foucault 1977) notion of cutting to refer to the process of dismantling fixed truths that position South Asian femininity as passive; in Foucault’s words ‘knowledge is not made for understanding, it is made for cutting’ (quoted in Rabinow, 1984:88). Subjecting Bengali women’s transcripts to the process of ‘cutting’, I am looking for those instances, practices of Bengali women that

amount to resistance and subversion of the prevailing discourses that highlight the existence/emergence of counter discourses.

My study approached the process of social identity construction as revealed in a set of practices that have the potential to transform/reinforce/negotiate hegemonic discourse while setting up alternative/counter discourses. Foucault's theorising on the constitution of subject was integral to critical reading of the data as I was 'cutting through' the data; I was moving back and forth through the emerging themes and patterns to look for similarities and differences between and within women's accounts in terms of dominant discourses around Bengali women as 'passive and double oppressed'.

My interest in specific themes and discourses was guided by my research questions and the literature outlined in my first chapter. I started the analysis by reading and re-reading participants' individual interviews. I manually handled the data, colour-coding the emergent themes and patterns through the data: first I highlighted those sections of transcripts that were linked to themes and then put together sections with similar themes. For example, on the basis of the broad headings of education I have created further subheadings of 'experience of learning English in Bangladesh and the UK', 'previous education' 'education as a source of empowerment', 'gendered construction of education'. So for example, 'the gendered construction of education' was divided into further subheadings: 'intrinsic and instrumental motivation' and 'the use of education to transcend gender boundaries'. The broad heading of education was informed by competing discourses of class, culture, religion, racism and post-colonial West v Rest discourse. On the basis of the West v Rest discourse I created further subheadings of 'Western v Non -Western

positioning’, and ‘strategies employed by women to resist/reinforce positioning within the discourse’. Of particular interest here were the points where women were challenging or conforming to inferior/superior positioning within the West v Rest discourse.

Women took a number of different identity positions across discursive themes such as ‘education’. Within the field of ESOL education the focus is on the way in which Bengali women negotiate/modify the subjective positions accorded to women by the means of an employment led ESOL Core Curriculum. As argued in the literature review the focus of the ESOL Core curriculum and much of ESOL training is on equipping ESOL learners with the functional skills to take up menial jobs within the labour market (Cooke, 2006; Wallace, 2007).

The aim of this study is to highlight women’s agency in different fields and identify strategies employed by this group of ESOL learners to counteract notions of ‘inactivity’ implicitly embedded in the various ESOL policy documents (BIS, 2010, 2011).

Summary of section C

Within this section I have set out the theoretical framework underpinning this study. I argue for the use of a post-colonial feminist perspective since such a perspective acknowledges and holds the potential to empower marginalised voices of ESOL Bengali female learners that have been constructed as a monolithic category within policy discourses (see p 20 of Chapter 1 section of literature review). In analysing conditions of oppression that position Bengali women as ‘other’, I argue for an intersectional approach to analysis inclusive of gender, class and other social relations. The fusion of post-colonial

scholarship and black feminism generates a theoretical perspective for the analysis of gender, race, class as a simultaneous process that is contextualised within the wider socio-economic circumstances: this study places research within the third space, representing a move from traditional, culturalist approaches.

Chapter 3: Bengali women and education

Introduction to data chapters

In this chapter I build upon the aims and objective of this study set out in the methodology chapter and apply the use of Foucault's analysis of power to my data analysis. I also attempt to position this study within the existing literature on South Asian women. I finally set out what is to come in the data chapters.

As I have argued throughout this thesis my study aims to deconstruct dominant ways of understanding Bengali femininities by highlighting variability between and within Bengali women's' accounts. Having reviewed the literature that has challenged the essentialist approaches to Asian culture in Chapter 1, my study aims to contribute to the body of literature that represents and engages with issues concerning Bengali women by bypassing traditional approaches that place culture as a source of Asian women's oppression. As outlined in Chapter 1, cultural and religious constraints are quoted as the main reason these women may not be able or willing to engage in paid work. South Asian femininities have been reduced to stereotypes of being 'ruthlessly oppressed and in need of liberation' (Brah, 1994: 158). Bengali women's lack of participation in educational/employment opportunities has been justified by the imagery of an oppressive authoritarian and patriarchal culture in which such women are thought to be located.

Feminists' critiques of stereotypical accounts of Asian femininities equated them with racist discourses whereby the focus has been shifted onto structural inequalities such as institutional racism and sexism that contribute to the subjugation of women. An extensive body of literature indicates that professionals' stereotypical views of Asian femininity foreclose women's opportunities of pursuing further education and employment (Brah & Minhas, 1986; Brah, 1994; Basit, 1997b; Shain, 2000).

This study rejects such 'culturalist' models which pathologise Asian families and present them as the source of subjugation of Asian femininities. Instead it explores and challenges the way in which the educational experiences of Bengali female learners are inflected by racism and structured through racialised, gendered discourses which position Asian women as passive victims of culture. Whilst social structure and practices may shape Bengali women's experiences of education, it is Bengali women's use of different strategies/practices to resist passive positioning that creates a space for the construction of alternative identities.

As stated in the methodology chapter, the aims of the study are to:

1. explore how Bengali female learners of ESOL are positioned and position themselves in relation to dominant hegemonic discourses
2. open-up space for non-hegemonic discourses
3. identify strategies and practices employed by Bengali women to trouble/unsettle dominant discourses that reduce Bengali women to 'docile bodies' (Foucault, 1979)

Since this study focuses on Bengali women's experiences of learning English, I will explore through an analysis of teacher's narratives

whether and in what ways teaching staff assign stereotypical views of South Asian female passivity to Bengali female learners within the context of ESOL learning environments. Engaging in a process of deconstruction of key ESOL policy documents in Section 1 of Chapter 1, I have argued that Bengali female learners have been positioned as inactive and passive recipients of education (BIS, 2011). This construction alludes to wider societal and economic inequalities which in turn can be traced to colonialism and imperialism (Brah, 1996).

The forthcoming analyses of data allude that Bengali women are not powerless to hegemonic discourses and are active in modifying/negotiating/adapting/rejecting constructions of narrow forms of femininity that are never stabilised or fixed but always subject to change within different contexts and differing social, historical and cultural circumstances. These multiple femininities are continuously reworked by active contestation and negotiation of available discourses. Bengali women's educational identities are interlinked with, and placed within wider cultural discourses of femininity, race, class and identity. To highlight Bengali women's active engagement and negotiation of discourses I draw upon a Foucauldian theoretical framework with particular reference to his concerns with power, knowledge and discourse (Foucault, 1972; 1980; 1990).

This section is organised as follows: The first section of this data chapter puts forward the argument that the lack of recognition of women's prior educational achievement can be attributed to the West v Rest discourse (Said, 1979). Then I turn to consider how the lack of recognition of prior learning is resisted by participants. The final section of the third chapter looks at the strategies employed by women to resist traditional identities within the domestic sphere. Chapters four and five focus on constructions of Bengali female

identities within two sites while chapter six explores the disparities between teaching staff's stereotypical positioning of Bengali female learners and women's own positioning within discourses of education and employment. Exploring Bengali women's aspirations for employment in Chapter seven I also highlight an awareness shared by the women of structural inequalities that shape future aspirations and strategies that women employ to subvert/resist/transform low-skilled subject positioning within employability discourses. Finally, Chapter eight considers the role of dress in the articulation of alternative subjectivities.

Bengali women's previous educational experience

Within this chapter I interpret ways in which Bengali women construct identities within their life history accounts. I draw attention to similarities and differences between, and within, individual accounts. The focus of this chapter is on Bengali women's previous experiences of learning English and how this positions them within the British educational system as 'Non-Western other learner', a term I derive from Said's 1979 West versus Rest discourse.

Non Western 'Other' construction of prior learning

When discussing previous educational experiences, the prevailing theme was that education from Bangladesh is not of the same standard as British education. Participants assigned a lower educational value to the qualifications gained in Bangladesh. In this section I want to argue that this inferior learner status assigned to Bangladeshi females' previous learning experiences can be deconstructed within the West versus Rest discourse (Said, 1979).

The participants' belief that Bengali education is of lower educational value than British is confirmed by the UK NARIC; the national agency which confers the value of international qualifications on behalf of the UK government. In recounting experiences of learning in Bangladesh numerous examples were offered to contest the construction of Bengali education as inferior in comparison to the British educational system. Despite completing 5 'A' levels in Bangladesh, Polly has been informed by NARIC that A- level from Bangladesh are equivalent to GCSEs in Britain and that she would still need to retake the A- levels in order to go to university.

I have to pass A-level, I talked to somebody: our A-level is GCSE pass here, that's why I have to do A-level here and then go to university. The education home is not as good as here and the qualifications we get are not the same as here.

(Polly, FE College)

Mallika described a situation in her learning where she attempted to study further only to be informed that the education gained in Bangladesh is not recognised to be of the same level.

I did SSCEs at the college but they are not the same as GCSEs here... people say they are but they are not.... you only find out when you try to study more and then they tell you need to repeat it in this country ... I think after I finish my class I will do it.

(Mallika, Training provider)

Like Polly, Mallika expresses the desire to continue studying to gain the GCSEs necessary to pursue her career in child-minding.

I want to do a child-minding course but when I asked they told me I need to have level 1 ESOL or GCSEs in English.

(Mallika, Training provider)

Even though these participants' experiences of education are downgraded within the British educational system through a lack of

formal recognition, the participants positioned themselves as being able to exercise choice over the educational choices, and took it for granted that upon completing ESOL courses they would be able to continue to pursue their education or employment choices. These participants had clear plans as to how to progress further into either Further/Higher Education or employment. It is significant that both Mallika and Polly are from lower middle class backgrounds since Ball *et al* 2000 argue that there is a distinct tendency amongst middle-class students to have a clear plan on progressing into higher education. Whilst having a choice and plan may be a middle class 'entitlement', Archer (2002a) in her study of Muslim girls' educational aspirations notes that girls tend to have clear plans about their futures. She extends this notion to be gendered: more girls than boys have specific educational aspirations.

Similar views were expressed by other middle class participants (Saima, Shimu, Tara) about the value of degrees completed in Bangladesh which were not perceived to be equivalent to the same British qualifications.

Saima, a History graduate from Dhaka University, was also made aware by NARIC that a degree from her country is not of the same value to the British degree:

I love history but Bengali and Islamic History. I know that this degree is not the same as degree here, in Britain, but I loved the subject. I asked about this and there is the agency and they tell you that it is not good enough for here. I know that I cannot use it for work but I study this because it was for me and the University of Dhaka was good place to study. Degrees at Dhaka University are good degrees and people know them but not the same as British degree.

(Saima, FE College)

Saima's History degree from University of Dhaka in Bangladesh would be considered equivalent to a Diploma of Higher Education standard (Bangladeshi Government's website from the National Curriculum & Textbook Board). However, degrees from any other Bangladeshi university would be conferred even lower educational value by NARIC and only considered equivalent to the Certificate of Higher Education. Therefore, skills and knowledge gained from the Bangladeshi educational system are not on a par with the British educational system and accordingly not awarded the same value.

Shimu wanted to make use of her Business Administration degree in the UK. However, upon starting her ESOL course she was told that her level of English, in particular her literacy, would stop her from working in an office.

I was very disappointed that I couldn't get a job placement in an office when I started my course... I am a business admin graduate ... I study this so I can work in an office ... or even work as a manager and it is my writing that is a problem...and possible no work experience. I will do another course in administration, BTEC diploma... it should be easy for me.

(Shimu, Training provider)

Shimu's positioning is on the margins of the West versus Rest discourse: she seemingly accepts the tutor's suggestion that her lack of literacy prevents her from working in an administration field rather than as a lack of recognition of her graduate status. However, it is her reassertion of the graduate status that acts to question the validity of the tutor's claim. Shimu resists the notion of a deficit, lacking learner by outlining the steps she needs to undertake in order to resist the 'Non- Western other' positioning in educational discourse.

There were other strategies which defied the ‘Non- Western other’ positioning, for example Sharifa spoke of her enjoyment of studying Philosophy:

I made many friends at the university ... It was nice to meet people that I would not normally meet and mix with other cultures... it was great time for me and if I could I would love to do it all over again...’

(Sharifa, Training provider)

During her time at the university Sharifa was able to extend her friendship groups and mix with people of different cultural backgrounds. Such account sits in contrast to Bhopal’s (1997) finding that educational experiences of mixing with students from different cultures serve to ‘dislocate’ women from their own religions and cultures. Sharifa re-emphasises this point when talking about her ESOL class:

In my English class I always want to talk to students from different countries...that is the best thing...-our discussions and asking people... not of the same culture as me what they think...

(Sharifa, Training provider)

These positive accounts of educational experiences in Bangladesh stand in opposition to the construction of Bangladeshi education as ‘Non-Western Other’ within the British educational system. Such downgrading of qualifications gained from Bangladesh would position Bengali female learners as inadequate, deficient and lacking. As I have argued in the literature review chapter this positioning is reproduced within the ESOL educational policy discourse where this group of ESOL learners due to non-recognition of prior skills and knowledge are constructed as low skilled learners (Brine, 2006). Such implicit constructions of Bengali female learners stand in opposition to EU ESOL learners whose prior learning and skills are recognised by

NARIC and such learners are therefore constructed as highly skilled migrant workers.

Applying Foucault's theoretical lens and in particular power/knowledge nexus to read the data would suggest that within British educational discourses the needs of the dominant group are served by declaring what can and cannot be counted as valid knowledge. For Foucault (1972:185) there is no discernible objective truth since the production of knowledge is linked to historically specific regimes of power. Therefore, what counts as knowledge has normative functions since it excludes 'non-Western Other' forms of knowledge as inferior, subjugated forms of knowledge.

Drawing upon the West versus Rest discourse (Said, 1979) I want to argue that power relations of racial and ethnic superiority and inferiority impinge upon educational discourses in both countries. Even though the Bangladeshi educational system is an artefact of the coloniser's educational system, it is discredited and delegitimised in dichotomous relation to the British educational system: it is therefore classified in a way that would be consistent with the construction of British educational system as a superior way of knowing (Cannella *et al.* 2004).

Said (1979) made use of Foucault's conceptualisation of discourses and power to provide unique insights into the complexities and workings of colonialist power. As a mechanism of power discourses illustrate the way in which the colonised structures continue to rewrite and reconceptualise what are considered to be subjugated, inferior forms of knowledge. The subservient status accorded to the Bengali educational system by external agencies such as NARIC operates as a tool of oppression: the coloniser retains the power to recolonise, discredit and delegitimise and further marginalise what counts as

knowledge (Cannella *et al.* 2004). Nandy (2002) interpreted Foucault's notion of power to argue that the subjugation of indigenous knowledge represents a second, less aggressive form of colonialism. I want to add here that the way in which the Bengali educational system is constructed within the British educational context reflects the power of colonial discourses: it is locked in a binary relation of dualism necessary in order for the British educational system to maintain its superior status. The dualism of West v Rest discourse reinstates power for the West to dominate and maintain its power and discredit any attempts made by the subaltern to move to the centre. The binaries within the West v Rest discourse aim to suppress the alternative forms of knowing and exclude 'other' forms of knowledge and subaltern voices. Driven by a need for control, powerful government agencies such as NARIC promote hegemonic epistemological discursive practices that generate power for particular groups of people. Interpreting the British educational system as more advanced, rigorous and embedded within the more superior structure, such constructions serve to normalise the need to define and limit the 'other' permanently: they define who belongs to the margins and to the centre.

In summary, the colonising power within the British educational system colonising system positions Bengali female learners on the margins, signifying this group as 'other'. The external UK agencies such as NARIC serve to promote the British educational system as a superior way of knowing: it is constructed as superior to indigenous Bangladeshi education which presents subjugated forms of knowledge of the 'non-Western Other'.

Such reading of the West v Rest discourse in the context of education would construct Bengali female participants as inferior, lacking and act

to reinstate their current discursive positioning within the context of ESOL education. This study seeks to disrupt racialised binaries rather than reproduce them. It attends to opening up a 'third space' that bypasses such dualistic representation that position the 'non-western Other' as inadequate (Bhabha, 1994). At the centre of this study are discursive practices employed by Bengali female learners to dismantle the sense of 'otherness' conferred upon Bengali female learners by pervasive and hegemonic discourses. Even though participants in this study are aware that the educational qualifications gained in Bangladesh are not equivalent in the British educational system, they, nevertheless, chose to focus on other benefits gained through studying such as intrinsic benefits of gaining a degree as well as broadening social circles with people of different cultural backgrounds. Women positioned themselves as having a choice over educational and employment opportunities, thereby challenging dominant notions of unitary South Asian female identity.

Within the next section Foucauldian inspired power/knowledge nexus reading of the data suggests that Bengali female participants are actively engaged in subverting/ negotiating 'Non-Western Other' construction in educational discourses.

Opening up alternative spaces through gendered construction of education: instrumental or intrinsic motivation?

In the following section I cut through the data (Foucault, 1972; 1980) to identify the different subject positions participants took in British and Bangladeshi educational discourses. At the centre of my analysis are practices employed by Bengali participants to resist inferior subject positionings within the British education system.

Some participants resisted the inferior positioning within the West versus Rest discourse as 'Non-Western Other' by voicing support for intrinsic value of education:

I loved studying for my degree in Philosophy ... I know that there is no real job at the end of it but then it was something I always wanted to study...I found the subject interesting ... it is upsetting that the qualification I got in Bangladesh is not recognised as such in this country.

(Tequila, FE college)

Even though Tequila places importance on the intrinsic value of her degree in Philosophy, she downplays the degradation of her degree to a HND diploma by stating that she knew from the outset that degree in Philosophy would not necessarily qualify her for specific career.

Other participants (Rashida, Shafika, Shamima, Mallika, Mani, Shaharin) also challenged Non-Western Other positionings by presenting a number of counter-narratives that constructed educational experiences in Bangladesh as a source of empowerment, betterment, and increased financial and personal independence:

I studied philosophy and economics at university. I did philosophy for pleasure. Economics was to give some idea about my future career. Philosophy wasn't very popular subject at school...many people at my university complained that they could not understand the subject ... I was so happy when I got good feedback from my tutor and felt that I was achieving something.

(Rashida, FE college)

Rashida constructed her educational experience at university as a time of empowerment. She felt pride in her educational achievement which set her apart from other students who found it difficult to grasp the subject of Philosophy. It is her understanding of the subject matter that positioned her as superior vis-à-vis other students. Rashida's account draws on instrumental as opposed to the intrinsic purpose of education: her motivation to study Economics was instrumental as she

was hoping to use it to further her professional career whilst her study of Philosophy was intrinsically personally fulfilling. Her account also provides a challenge to hegemonic gendered stereotypes of Bengali women to typically be stay at home mothers (Anthias, 1996; Archer, 2003).

Like Rashida, Shafika heavily invested into her education and purposefully chose to study economics at the university; she believed this would enable her to become financially independent and take better care of her family. Shafika's investment in a degree in Bangladesh is linked with the prospect of increased financial and personal independence. Her primary motivation for pursuing a degree in economics was to gain financial independence from her future husband.

I wanted to study economics...I believed this would enable me to find a good job at the end...I wanted to make sure that when I finished the university I was able to follow the career I choose...I did not want to be in the position of dependence on my husband and his family.

(Shafika, FE college)

In Ahmad *et al*, (2003) study participants also reported economic independence as a primary motivation for studying at degree level.

Now I know I need to study more if I want to do anything in economics. My degree is not a degree in this country but I believe that education in Bangladesh prepared me for education here.

(Shafika, FE college)

Shafika constructs her educational experiences in Bangladesh as a stepping stone to a future career and a future self that is independent and potentially a breadwinner. Like Rashida, Shafika's account transcends male-female boundaries that confine female role to the sphere of domesticity (Ahmad *et al*. 2003; Archer 2003). She

overturns a 'Non-Western other' positioning by constructing her educational experience in positive terms.

Shaharin also spoke positively about her educational experience and subverted negative constructions of the Bangladeshi educational system by drawing upon the sense of empowerment she gained from it:

I studied Humanities degree...I knew it is difficult to get a job with Humanities degree...but I did it because I liked the subject...but it wasn't very popular choice...my family did not think it was good subject...they wanted me to do something that give me job at the end.

(Shaharin, Training provider)

Shaharin's intrinsic motivation for studying a Humanities subject may have caused opposition from her family but she was still supported in the completion of her degree. Shaharin's account provides a counterbalance to other research that implies that support is gendered amongst South Asian families (Wade & Souter, 1994; Khanum, 1995). Instead, it provides additional support for Ahmad *et al.*'s (2003) finding that parents encourage their daughters to become economically independent.

What is even more striking about Shaharin's account is that she was able to negotiate her choice of the academic subject within and despite of patriarchal structures. Her father, in particular, played an instrumental role in supporting her with her studies and even appeased Shaharin's mother, therefore, contravening the stereotypes that Bangladeshi fathers are 'domineering' (Niven *et al.* 2013). Ahmad *et al.* (2001) suggests that fathers are more supportive of their daughters' academic achievements due to an increase in a social prestige associated with having an educated daughter. Shaharin's account is also consistent with other studies that have reported that Bangladeshi

women are increasingly more successful in negotiating their educational choices with their parents (Dale *et al.*, 2002; Bagguley & Hussain, 2007).

After some time my parents came round as they saw how much I enjoyed the subject...it gave them a sense of pride, my father was always saying to my mum that I should do it if that is what I want.

(Shaharin, Training provider)

Shamima spoke of the sense of independence she gained studying away from home and having to fend for herself:

When I first went to the university it was difficult for me... I was away from home and I was very lonely at first...I wanted to stop and go home but then I knew I would have disappointed my parents...my mum always wanted me to be independent in the marriage...now I am so proud of myself that I did it away from home.

(Shamima, FE college)

For Shamima the major motivating factor was to honour her mother's wishes and gain independence in the marriage. Despite initially feeling isolated living away from home, it was her desire to succeed in the face of adversity so that she might fulfil her mother's wishes.

The middle-class social background of the participant coupled with parental encouragement meant that Shamima was under immense pressure to complete her degree and become another success story, therefore following in her mother's footsteps:

My mum was a solicitor and she always raised us to be independence...she didn't want us to end up staying at home all day getting depressed, just cleaning and cooking.

(Shamima, FE college)

Ahmad (*et al.* 2003) in her study of South Asian women and employment also reported that the educational and employment status

of mothers had an important effect upon the educational and employment aspirations of their daughters. Similarly, Niven *et. al*'s (2013) study of the higher education experiences amongst British – Bangladeshi women recognises how important it is to have a positive role model in the family that defies traditionally bound roles of women within the domestic spheres.

The educational achievement of Shamima and her mother represents a counterbalance to patriarchal norms that confer South Asian femininities within the domestic sphere as guardians of culture (Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1992). Such findings represent a counter discourse to mutually exclusive and oppositional gender binaries within which South Asian women are characterised as responsible for taking care of family, homework and childcare.

In embracing different purposes of education these accounts present a challenge to the subservient status accorded to the Bengali female learners within British educational discourses. These accounts represent a counterbalance to the deficient, lacking and inactive status accorded to the women within the ESOL educational policies (BIS, 2010 a, b and 2011) since Bengali women in this study took on an active role in construction and reconstruction of their learning identities within and despite patriarchal structures. Through these accounts the Bangladeshi education system is constructed as a source of empowerment and personal achievement.

Some other accounts (Fatima, Dilwara) served to reproduce and sustain the Bangladeshi educational system as deficient and in the dichotomous relationship with British educational system through which it was inadvertently reproduced as 'Non- Western Other'. Such

accounts served to normalise the construction of Bangladeshi education as inferior and lacking.

I did not want to study degree in my country as I do not think it is good...if you want to study degree you should study here...it is not recognised...many my friends have degrees but they are not recognised here...what is point? ...study there but here nobody want to know.

(Fatima, Training provider)

In sustaining a Non-Western Other construction of Bangladeshi education Fatima attempts to position herself outside the parameters of Western/Non-Western discourses of education. She rejects intrinsic purposes of education; my interpretation of Fatima's apparent refusal to invest in her education is interlinked with her socio-economic background. Fatima is from the rural part of Bangladesh; her father held a manual position in Bangladesh and mother was a housewife.

Education was not important in my family...my mother and father were fine that I did not want to study more and when I got 17 I came here and get married.

(Fatima, Training provider)

This finding is in contrast to Ahmad's (2001; 2003) and Brah's (1996) assertions that South Asian women, regardless of their socio-economic background placed a great emphasis on education. Drawing on Lawler (2008) and Norton (1995; 2000)'s work on identity I want to put forward the argument that participants in this study are continuously engaged in identity work. So for example, Fatima may have not initially seen the purpose of education in Bangladesh and did not feel that she needed to invest in it due to lack of family guidance but in her life in Britain she assigns greater importance to it. Like Shafika, she describes the importance of gaining financial independence by engaging in further educational opportunities in

Britain that would enable her to ‘stand on her own feet’, a sentiment expressed by many participants in this study.

I am divorced and I want to provide for my family...it is important for me to study more so I can get skills I need to get a job...in this country you have to have good education if you want to work... now I think it is no good I did not study before when I was married...now I think education is important...it gives you more confidence and more independence.

(Fatima, Training provider)

Fatima’s sense of ‘who she was’ changed over time (Norton, 1995). Changing life circumstances such as starting a new life in Britain, getting divorced and having a family were all contributing factors that made Fatima re-evaluate the importance of education. Through her life story it is possible to discern multiple and contradictory subject positions that Fatima took up through educational discourses: whilst she initially positioned herself outside the parameters of the West versus Rest educational discourse, she negotiated an active role in the British educational context. She was prepared to invest in education since it was interlinked with discourses of betterment, financial and personal independence and self-sufficiency. Her investment in education is interconnected with her changed subject position as a family provider within the interconnecting discourses of patriarchy, culture and ‘race’. Different subject positions taken up at various points in Fatima’s life history illustrate fluid, multiple and shifting as well as gendered and raced nature of identity (Brah, 1996; Lawler, 2008).

Dilwara’s account of her educational history in Bangladesh was also couched in negative terms. She completed SSCs (British GCSES equivalents) in Bangladesh. She constructed her school experiences as pathological;

I hated my school, it was not good time for me...teachers did not like me because I never know the right answer ...I felt stupid every time I got things wrong and was not like my sister that was good student and went on to study more...I was so happy when I got married I did not have to study and go to school any more or college.

(Dilwara, Training provider)

Dilwara presents an account of her younger self that alludes to the deficit construction of Bangladeshi education: she felt thwarted and humiliated for not being able to learn and progress. Her sister's ability to succeed at school further increased her sense of humiliation, inadequacy and marginalisation. Her experience impacted negatively on her self-identity as a learner, as she put it she 'felt stupid'. This sense of inadequacy was further compounded by negative attention she received from her teacher, who instead of encouraging her to succeed made her feel humiliated for not understanding the subject matter. As a result, she was relieved that she was not expected to study further. The interconnecting discourses of education, patriarchy and culture confined Dilwara's femininity within the domestic sphere.

Dilwara's account of her educational experience in Bangladesh promotes a deficit construction of Bangladeshi education where her teacher's pedagogical practices come into question as they fail to empower learners. Dilwara did not actively resist being positioned as 'stupid' in a Bangladeshi educational context. However, Dilwara's marginalised subject position is overturned through the British educational context where she sets up a counter discourse that positions her in more powerful subject position.

I think it is better to learn English here ...teachers are nice... I feel I can make mistakes and don't feel stupid like I did in Bangladesh...teachers much nice in this country...in my country teachers are very strict.

(Dilwara, Training provider)

My analysis of the socio-economic background of participants also highlights the extent to which participants from middle-class backgrounds (Tequila, Rashida, Shafika, Shamima, Mallika, Mani, Shaharin) resisted their positioning as 'Non-Western Other' and framed their educational experiences positively. By contrast, participants from working-class backgrounds (Fatima and Dilwara) spoke negatively of education in Bangladesh and expressed preferences for the British educational system within which they took up more active roles and resisted their previous subject positioning.

In addition to social class differentials there was also a marked difference between the participants who studied at the University of Dhaka and other universities in Bangladesh. Through some accounts (Saima, Shaharin, Tara and Shamima) a degree from the University of Dhaka was constructed as having greater educational value than a degree from any other Bangladeshi University:

My degree is from Dhaka...in my country degree from Dhaka is like Oxford and Cambridge in this country it is very difficult to get a place and you really need to be good to study there.

(Shaharin, Training provider)

I studied at Dhaka...degree from Dhaka in my country is recognised as one of the best...and to be student there is fantastic...I had really good experience and nice teachers.

(Tara, Training provider)

Everybody in Bangladesh know about the University of Dhaka...it is our very good university...and I think the best in Bangladesh...I studied economics at the university...it was difficult but time well spent.

(Shamima, FE college)

These accounts of educational experiences at the University of Dhaka sit outside hegemonic constructions of Bangladeshi education as deficient and lacking in comparison to British universities. The pre-migration middle-class positioning and the attitude of cultural

superiority is ingrained in these participants' habitus in the forms of dispositions. It can be read that Shaharin's assertion that a degree from the University of Dhaka is equivalent to Cambridge or Oxford signals an awareness of the extent to which education is class stratified. It indicates a 'sense of one's place' (Bourdieu, 1985b) since students tend to go to university where there are 'people like us' (Bourdieu, 1990). Similar sentiments are expressed by Tara who emphasises how well established the university is in Bangladesh. She subverts the notion of deficient learner assigned to Bangladeshi participants through the Non-Western Other discourse by drawing attention to the specificity of the university of Dhaka student experience.

The pre-immigration social status of these participants has important effects on the ways in which the 'Non-Western Other' positioning in educational discourse is subverted. Here, I want to argue that it is indeed the middle-class background of these participants that gives participants confidence to position themselves outside 'the West v Rest' binary discourse that attempts to position Bangladeshi participants as less knowledgeable. It is the act of positioning themselves and the worth of the university attended outside the binary of Western /Non-Western that creates an alternative space which subverts the hegemonic reading of Bengali education as 'non-Western other' and positioning as lacking or inferior.

Moreover, participants' positioning outside binary parameters highlights an awareness of the way in which social inequalities are bound up with the educational inequalities in both countries (Reay *et al.* 2009). By specifying the University of Dhaka as the university these participants construct university experiences as specifically connected to class background. These participants have seen through

the myth of meritocracy. Insistence on upholding the status of the Dhaka University would imply tacit knowledge that other universities in Bangladesh reflect choices and aspirations of the working-classes. Therefore, the educational system in Bangladesh draws parallels with the British since it is highly class stratified whereby prestigious universities, such as the University of Dhaka, exert powerful influence over how students position themselves within the discourse of education and how they are positioned by others (Reay *et al.* 2009). However, these participants (Shamima, Samia, Shaharin and Tara) draw attention to the fact that the University of Dhaka degree is not like a degree from any other University in Bangladesh. These assertions reflect particular participants' social location from which they are generated. Whilst most families that have settled in the Tower Hamlets area of London come from rural parts of Bangladesh, these participants are of urban background. On the basis of familial socio-economic background, the middle class pre-migration status could be conferred upon these participants. However, such conceptualisation of the social status would focus mainly on the structural factors and would fail to capture the agency an individual exercises in the way in which he/she positions himself in the social world.

However, it could also be argued that some middle class participants maintained their sense of belonging and superiority vis-à-vis other Bengali female participants who did not share the same educational /language/class backgrounds. By emphasising the specificity of the Dhaka University experience, these participants are also drawing attention to their privileged background that has enabled them to access the cultural capital bestowed upon the Dhaka University graduates. Placing the University of Dhaka on equal footing with Cambridge and Oxford universities in Britain, it could be argued that

the Dhaka graduates have inadvertently positioned non-Dhaka graduates as 'other' and 'lacking' within the Bangladeshi educational discourses of their own.

Brah (1992; 1993a; 1996) argues that South Asian women do not represent a single homogenous category. The social background of South Asian women prior and post migration is not identical. The identities of South Asian women need to be understood in relation to social and historical background. Such theorising needs to include factors such as urban/rural background of the South Asian women prior to migration, the socio-economic background of families from which women originate as well as socio-economic status achieved in Britain. However, the category of South Asian women continues to be homogenised so that certain stereotypes are promoted which only serve to disguise structural inequalities.

Whilst some participants subvert 'Non-Western Other' positioning by upholding the intrinsic purpose of education (Tequila, Saima, Shaharin, Tara and Shamima) over instrumental, others employed different strategies to subvert the construction of 'Non-Western Other' learner. Whilst an initial reading of Polly, Shahida, Fatima and Mallika's narratives could be interpreted as acceptance of a 'deficient learner' status since qualifications gained at the college are not of equivalent value to British qualifications, it is participants' determination to study further to overcome the 'gaps' in education that places these participants in positions of simultaneously undergoing and exercising power. Polly perceives A-levels as a necessary requirement to pursue an Accounts Management course at the university and secure a job within a bank. Unlike others, who see intrinsic benefits of Higher Education, within Polly's narrative education is primarily viewed as an instrumental means to succeed in her chosen career of banking:

I want to do Accounts management, if I complete my ESOL course, do my A levels course I want to work in the bank –it’s good job because everyone works for the council and I don’t want to do that...in our country all men are doing banking but no women – all men work in the bank so that’s why I fix my mind all I want to do is work in the bank.

(Polly, FE college)

Similarly, for Shahida who has finished GCSEs equivalents in Bangladesh, ESOL course provides an opportunity to complete her education and decide which career she wants to pursue. In her account the instrumental motivation takes precedence over intrinsic. In pursuing ESOL classes she wants to overturn her previous subject positions of someone who has ‘no education’ to a self-sufficient, financially independent provider for her family, forging a new subject position within both public and private spheres.

I finished SSCs in Bangladesh, got married–I think for us women education is important–that is why I want to do my best here and learn English so I can do something...I can work...I want to have enough money for my family and do not want to be no education...and with no money... I do not want to ask for money...I want to make my money.

(Shahida, FE college)

Like Fatima, Shahida’s learning identity intersects with her constantly re-negotiated familial, raced, and gendered identity. In promoting the instrumental purpose of education Fatima and Shahida’s accounts are positioned outside hegemonic South Asian discourses about women which are constructed around the normative assumptions of South Asian men as family providers.

Francis’s (1999) study of girls’ educational achievements argues that construction of education is gendered since more girls than boys support the intrinsic benefits of education whereas boys focus more on gaining education for instrumental reasons. Such gendered

constructions of education collude with a conceptualisation of Bangladeshi masculinity through a 'breadwinner identity' whereby Bangladeshi men are charged with financially providing for the family (Archer *et al.* 2001b; Archer, 2003).

Within Polly's narrative her instrumental construction of education would suggest that she opposes such a view and indeed wants to forge a career in the field of banking that is constructed as masculine in Bangladesh. Thus, Polly resists the conceptualisation of Asian femininity as oppressed and lacking agency. In stating a preference for what is considered to be a traditionally male occupation, she disrupts hegemonic understandings of gendered occupations and positions herself outside the normative understanding of Asian femininity. In other words, Polly mobilises the discourse of education and gendered cultural discourses to subvert a patriarchal discourse in which public (exclusively male) and private space (exclusively female) are positioned in a mutually exclusive gender binary.

Within such accounts hegemonic Asian femininity would be positioned within the domestic space whereby women would be exclusively defined within caring roles for the family, children and household duties. Yuval-Davis & Anthias (1989) argue that within the hegemonic discourse framing understandings of South Asian culture women are positioned as 'cultural carriers' whereby gender stereotypes of passive, meek, subservient Asian femininity is positioned as the true 'ethnic' subject (Anthias, 1996).

At first glance it could be argued that Samia's belief in the intrinsic value of education resonates with the gendered construction of education identified by Francis (1999). As a stay at home mother, Samia's construction of femininity accords with the dominant analysis

of Asian femininity whereby women are positioned as the representatives and bearers of 'culture' (Anthias, 1989). An initial reading of the data, might indicate her subservience to her childcaring responsibilities and to her husband, which could be constructed of an idealized notion of a 'traditional woman' from Bangladesh who has not been influenced by any Western notions of equality.

She resists the traditional gender dichotomy in which men are breadwinners and women are 'stay at home mothers' with domestic and care responsibilities by expressing a wish to continue to pursue an alternative career once her son is more independent: she is also critical of her husband who performs many of the stereotypical characteristics associated with traditional Bangladeshi masculinity since he does not perform any household duties:

It's too hard for me because...I have no time (to work) when my child is grown up then... (I can look for work) now I have a lot of cooking, homework, cleaning, bank payments—everything I have to do, my husband no help with nothing, no help with my son's homework, no help with house.

(Saima, FE college)

Cutting through the data in this section I have explored the significance of West versus Rest discourse on previous educational experiences of Bengali female learners. I have also identified various practices employed by Bengali participants which resist a 'non Western -Other' learner positioning. In stating different motivations for education as either intrinsic or instrumental some Bengali female participants forged alternative spaces that bypassed gendered and ethnicised binaries. I argued that some Bengali participants' accounts could be positioned outside the boundaries of hegemonic femininities and interpreted as negotiating/forging alternative spaces of Asian femininity which oscillate between the discourses of culture, gender and race. Other participants became active in promoting and sustaining

constructions of Bangladeshi education as 'other'. The accounts provided here highlight tensions and contradictions within the participants' narratives of educational experiences.

Challenging constructions of traditional femininities within the domestic sphere

The notion of subservient, passive South Asian femininities was challenged in other accounts. Whilst in some narratives Bangladeshi women initially placed themselves within the confines of traditional femininities, a Foucauldian inspired power/knowledge reading of the data would suggest that various practices were put into place to challenge a potentially subservient status that an initial reading of data might confer. Analysis within this section highlights the way in which Bengali women's construction of 'traditional' identities within the domestic sphere challenge dominant assumptions about South Asian femininities that have come to inflect Bengali women's' subjectivities.

The majority of the women interviewed in this sample came to Britain through marriage to British nationals and some of them joined the husband's extended family. Even though the topic of arranged marriages was not the focus of my study, it was addressed by many participants through different stages of interviews. Retrospectively, I felt that for many participants engaging in research with a white researcher meant they felt obliged to explain the norms of the culture that was so different to my own.

As I argued in the methodology chapter my own positioning as a white researcher within the research was continuously shifting. In the early stages of the research, as a white woman, I was positioned as a *ghair* (stranger) in relation to the culture (Brah, 1999). Talking about her

reason for coming here Rianna brought up the topic of arranged marriage since her marriage was arranged by her parents:

My marriage was arranged by my family. So my family decide who I should marry. It is not like here; you decide who you want to marry. I met my husband at the wedding.

(Riana, FE college)

Sharing this information with the white interviewer acts as a reminder that this is an uncommon practice amongst white people in Britain, therefore placing what is mainly an Asian tradition in dichotomous relationship with the white culture which is characterised by female agency. i.e. – ‘you decide who you want to marry’.

It is the lack of agency for South Asian woman which is at the centre of Riana’s account of her arranged marriage. Archer’s (1998) study suggests that Asian girls felt that they retained agency within the tradition of arranged marriages. Even though Riana agreed and did not actively oppose her family’s choice of husband, she felt resentful that it had thwarted her chances of finishing her secondary education in Bangladesh:

I did not want to marry at time, I want to finish school but my family wants me to marry and in our society you need to keep family happy ... I wanted to go to university.... study more.

(Riana, FE college)

Riana’s account supports evidence that arranged marriages for daughters are axiomatic as soon as women finish or are near the stage of finishing secondary education (Wade & Souter, 1992; Khanum, 1995). Investigating routes into education and employment for young Bangladeshi women Dale *et al.* (2002) found that some parents were reluctant for daughters to continue in education and preferred them to marry early. For a girl to continue in post-16 education it was

necessary for parents to be confident that the daughter would not in any way threaten family's *izzat* and therefore bring dishonour on the family. Ahmad *et al* (2003: 28) argue that the reason some parents rush to arrange the marriage for their daughters is because of religious and cultural concerns since 'corrupting' and 'Westernising' influences of education may bring family's *izzat* under threat. Securing marriage for a daughter would mean that the family's *izzat* would be passed onto parents' in-law who would decide upon the woman's future role within the family.

A classed reading of Riana's pre-migration position might suggest that working-class families do not consider education important for their daughters. Participants in Ahmad *et al.* (2003) study put forward the view that the way in which religious practices were interpreted by some parents, in particular those originating from rural and semi-rural backgrounds, may have been more conservative than intended by Islam. Such a reading would inadvertently provide support to the popular cultural discourse that continues to represent Asian families as problematic and a source of inequalities (Rattansi, 1992). However, there is evidence to the contrary which suggests that education is considered important regardless of parental education levels or social class (Brah, 1993; Basit, 1996a, 1996b).

Here, the theme of respect for her parents' choice of husband and apparent subservience to patriarchal discourse would position Riana as a victim of oppressive Asian cultural practices:

In our society women are responsible for everything in the house. When I first came over here I had to take care of the household—my mother in law did this before when she first got married and -now it was my time to do it ...it mean looking after my in-laws ... My father-in-law who was disabled because of heart attack and children and keeping the house clean and tidy.

(Riana, FE college)

The newly found domestic role upon the arrival in Britain was recounted by other participants in the study, for example: Mallika and Mana recounted the extent of domestic duties, of which taking care of elderly or frail in-laws was an integral component:

My duty is to look after the house and everything in it... my mother-in-law requires a lot of care...she has so many health problems so I have to help her with domestic duties...cleaning, cooking...my husband work so I need to make sure that I have fresh clothes ready work ...I never have any time for myself.

(Mallika, Training Provider)

My day starts early ... I get up and make breakfast for myself, my husband, children and in-law... then I have to start preparing lunch...cleaning, ironing, hovering, taking my children to and from school... when my husband get back from work I need to make dinner... .and it is difficult to making dinner as everybody has different things they can or can't eat...by the end of the day I am exhausted and then I have to start it all over again.

(Mana, Training Provider)

Even though these participants initially constructed an idealised notion of 'traditional women' from Bangladesh which are portrayed within the hegemonic discourses as passive and tradition bound, women in this study engaged in various practices of negotiation with their in-laws in order to gain access to education and employment opportunities.

Employing a power/ knowledge reading of the data it is Riana's practice of negotiating her educational opportunities with her in-laws that enables her to complete her A-level in the UK and gain professional experience of working as a teaching assistant:

I live with my in-laws and I looked after my father in-law for 5 years until he died... now I live with my mother-in-law and my husband... my husband works and I want to work too...In this country last year I did voluntary work

for the teaching assistant and I did teaching assistant course last year and then I did 6 months' work in my children's school for the reception class.

(Riana, FE college)

Accessing opportunities to undertake voluntary work and gain professional qualifications involved a process of negotiation with her mother-in-law and her husband. Within the domestic sphere power relations are constantly in tension. Riana, as a newly arrived bride, was caught up in power relations with her in-laws and her husband who both wanted to confine her subjectivity and her actions within the domestic sphere.

It was very difficult for me at the beginning as I didn't know I would need to do so much round the house...I was not expected to go out without my husband, and my father in law needed constant care and attention ...I could not say no to them...it was expected of me and I did what was expected of me.

(Riana, FE college)

Taking on domestic duties and responsibilities associated with the notion of South Asian femininity, Riana was initially positioned as submissive and meek within the patriarchal discourse within which control of women is central (Yuval-Davis & Saghal, 1992).

As was the case for Riana, the burden of looking after in-laws was recounted by other participants who missed opportunities to pursue education and realize ambitions for social mobility.

I started an English course at the college...my mother-in-law got ill with heart problems and I had to stay at home and look after him...I started the course but could not continue after a while...it was all too much.

(Afruza, FE college)

Mobilising discourses of betterment, self-sufficiency and resourcefulness Riana was able to free herself from the confines of

the domestic sphere and pave initial access to the domains of the public sphere by engaging in FE opportunities and volunteering at her son's school. It is through the education and more specifically her access to ESOL classes that she gained the ability and confidence to negotiate further opportunities with her in-laws:

Problem is very difficult for our society...children...everything is managed to me...so that is why it was very difficult for me to learn...so that's why we are thinking first we learn speaking and spelling then we do other things.

(Riana, FE college)

This extract illustrates how important it was for Riana to access English training opportunities in order to open up alternative spaces. In order to access these opportunities Riana engaged in a process of negotiation with her in-laws who exercised power over her. Riana's initial performance of obedient, meek housewife who dedicates her time and energy to looking after her children and in-laws can be read as means of subverting the power that her in-laws exercised over her. She relies on this initial performance to negotiate her own space within the public sphere and therefore challenge dominant construction of Asian femininity as passive, 'meek and subservient'. This finding is supported by Dale *et al.*'s 2000 study, which demonstrates that women are required to engage in processes of negotiation with in-laws in order to access employment opportunities after marriage.

Similar accounts were offered by other female participants who negotiated future opportunities for learning with in-laws and husband. Faiza's education like Riana's was disrupted due to an arranged marriage. Faiza's pre-migration social positioning would point towards a working class origin, taking into account her rural background and father's low skilled employment. However, despite her working-class background, education was considered important in providing better opportunities for personal advancement:

I didn't like my school- my English classes were boring...I just found that way of learning was not good for me...but my family, my father wanted me to do well in a school...in a way when I got married I was quite relieved that I had to leave the college and leave for the new life in England...but now I value my English classes...they have helped realise my dream to work as a teaching assistant.

(Faiza, FE college)

Ahmad's (2001) study on educational achievement of Muslim women highlighted the role fathers have in encouraging their daughter to gain academic credentials. Education was perceived as a form of 'investment' since it served to modify women's traditional roles within the family (Ahmad, 2001; Ahmad *et al.* 2003). This finding provides a strong counterbalance to the patriarchal ideologies of women as homemakers, whereby relegation of women to the domestic sphere acted as a deterrent from pursuing any educational and employment opportunities.

My study rejects 'culturalist' explanations (outlined in the literature review) within which the religious and family constraints ascribe the passive role to South Asian women in Western discourses. Here I put forward the argument that Faiza's pre-migration socio economic status and disrupted educational trajectory impacted upon her life in Britain.

Faiza, like Riana, was also caught up in power relations with her in-laws. At the time of interview, she had lived in the country for 18 years but only in the last four years was she able to attend ESOL courses at the local college. She wanted to learn English upon arrival to the UK but was prevented by the pressure to adhere to the stereotype of traditional femininity exerted by her in-laws.

I stayed at home...looked after the children and family...before I was with my husband's family.

(Faiza, FE college)

What was particularly difficult for her was not being able to understand her own children when they used English at home:

My children speak English at home. I can understand what they are speaking. Sometimes they speak English with me. Before I didn't understand. Now I understand almost everything.

(Faiza, FE college)

Within the interconnecting discourses of patriarchy, tradition and culture Faiza's hegemonic feminine identity was set in opposition to her husband's traditional South Asian masculinity that struggles over the control of Asian women (Gilroy, 1993; Alexander, 1996). Within the patriarchal discourse traditional South Asian femininities are restricted to the private sphere (Archer, 2003). Within the discourse of the heterosexual normative Muslim family, Faiza's husband would be positioned as a breadwinner (Brah 1996; Ahmad 2001; Ahmad *et al.* 2003; Archer *et al.* 2001b). Within this discourse the gender binaries are reproduced whereby the men are expected to bear the financial burden of the immediate and extended family whereas women perform caring roles within the extended family unit. Whilst it could be argued that the caring role that was bestowed upon Faiza prevented her from taking any opportunities to learn English as soon as she arrived in the country, the alternative reading would be that Faiza willingly chose to prioritise her family's needs over her own educational needs.

Retrospectively, I came to the conclusion that it was the lack of my maternal status that favoured the first reading, whereby she had no choice but to 'succumb to' the life in the private sphere.

Faiza's inability to communicate in English restricted her movements to the private sphere since she relied on her husband to translate in public situations. Lack of opportunities to access ESOL classes could

be attributed to *purdah*. Within traditional patriarchal South Asian discourses strict cultural or ‘patriarchal’ constraints such as *purdah* refer to social practices that restrict woman’s participation in public life (Brah, 1993). However, Brah (1993: 448; 1996: 137) argues that the extent to which *purdah* is observed depends upon the class, caste, religion and other dimensions.

Even though there is no explicit reference to *purdah*, Faiza talks about how restricted her movement was in her early life in Britain:

‘When I first came to Britain I couldn’t do much...I had to stay at home and look after the family and because my children were little...but also in my culture woman looks after family and children’

(Faiza, FE College)

For Faiza pressure against education mostly came from her in-laws. The support she received from her husband to pursue her educational and employment opportunities was relatively recent and would seem to indicate that he would have been more inclined to permit his wife to study in the early stages of their marriage but failed to voice this for fear of upsetting his parents and other relatives.

Parents- in law were also likely to have come under pressure from their own sub- community in allowing their daughter in- law to place her educational needs on the same level as her family needs. If such a reading of Faiza’s account was solely attributed to *purdah*, it would provide further evidence that South Asian women are controlled by their families and positioned as objects of control and legitimation (Ghuman, 2003). However, this study aims to provide alternative readings of hegemonic Asian femininities. Advocating the fluidity of power, my reading of Faiza’s extract is that her in-laws were initially in the position of power but with ailing health, that power has shifted

overtime so that they were primarily beholden to their daughter in-law for support. Power relations between Faiza and her in-laws were constantly in tension and signified both autonomy and control.

After moving away from her in-laws the power shifted so that Faiza became the vehicle of power and was able to command full support from her husband (and in-laws) to engage in English learning.

According to Faiza her husband is very supportive of her efforts to learn English:

My husband always said you improved lots of things...you don't need to me when you speak outside, before if I were anywhere some people speak English I asked my husband what they said, now I can't say because I can understand so he said you are improving lots of things.

(Faiza, FE college)

In supporting his wife with her studies, Faiza's husband dispels the myth of Asian hegemonic masculinities that are asserted by exercising control over Asian women (Gilroy, 1993; Alexander, 1996). Both Riana and Faiza's accounts of arranged marriages and life in the domestic sphere can be read as illustrating the discursive production of feminine identities through interconnecting discourses of patriarchy, culture, class, race and gender. Both women had education disrupted due to arranged marriages. A Foucauldian power/knowledge reading of the data reveals that both participants engaged in practices that subverted the passive status conferred within normative patriarchal and cultural discourses. Whilst initially positioned as passive within the domestic sphere, these participants forged their ways into the public sphere by resisting the relations of power and therefore negotiating different subject positions. These alternative subject positions were constructed through processes of negotiation with their in-laws.

Conclusion

By drawing on Bengali women's life histories I have explored the intersections of race, class, gender and its impact on learning identities. The data provided by a sample of Bengali women can be read as opposing and resisting popular assumptions about South Asian femininities which principally reinforce notions of passiveness and confinement to the domestic sphere (Davies, 1989). Engaging in various discursive practices, participants challenged and transgressed the gendered-boundaries in both the public and private spheres of lives lived by South Asian wives.

My interpretation of the data illustrates that educational identities of Bengali women are not distinctly homogenous: femininity is a negotiable category and a site of constant struggle between competing meanings and discourses of 'race', gender, patriarchy and 'culture'. This sample of women variously challenged stereotypes of themselves as 'victims' of patriarchy by presenting as able to negotiate roles assigned within family structures through arranged marriage, domestic responsibilities and access to education and employment opportunities.

Chapter 4: Experiences of learning English in Bangladesh and the UK

Introduction

Within this chapter I argue that post-structuralist conceptualisations of identity provide the means to gain valuable insights into the persistent struggle Bengali female participants encounter when negotiating their subjectivities in a variety of learning contexts both in Bangladesh and the UK.

ESOL Bengali female learners' journey from passive to active recipients of knowledge

Participants were asked about their experiences of learning English in their country of origin and asked to compare those with their experiences of learning English in the UK. The majority of participants at the FE institution spoke favourably about their experiences of learning English in the UK. Some participants recounted unfavourable experiences about their ESOL teachers and blamed them for failing their exams. However, participants' views on education and training received at the training provider were least favourable.

Describing their experiences of learning English in Bangladesh which is a part of the country's National Curriculum and therefore compulsory, participants spoke of the teaching and learning methods that were mainly focused on exams, thus promoting instrumental process of education:

In our country we study English through book – the teacher give us book and we have to read the book and then we are tested ...if we pass we can go on next level, if not we repeat the year.

(Shahida, FE college)

My reading of teaching and learning methods described by participants constructs language learning as a process of acquiring discrete language items through mechanical repetition and drilling. As a teacher of ESOL I place a little educational value on these methods of teaching and learning as students find it difficult to transfer skills acquired through this method of teaching to real communicative competence. Within this teacher-centred model of education students are passive absorbers of information since they are not required to actively engage with materials presented to them. However, such a reading is

couched within the Western educational methodology which through the nature of my teaching profession I am imbricated. Adhering to this view I am also inadvertently stating a preference for the Western model of education and placing it in binary opposition to the Non-Western, thus invoking the West v Rest discourse (Said, 1979; Hall, 1992; Cannella *et al.* 2004). As I have argued in the previous chapter by privileging certain pedagogies and values attached to the Western teaching and learning methods I am also promoting the British educational system as a superior way of knowing.

However, in acknowledging the workings of postcolonial discourses I aim to provide a nuanced analysis of the data that would enable me to generate my own subject positions from which to resist the colonial way of knowing which produces power for particular groups of people and signifies any 'Non-Western' way of knowing as 'other'.

The majority of participants at both sites expressed a keen dislike for teaching and learning methods used in Bangladesh and took pleasure in trying out different methods that promoted learners' autonomy.

I did not like studying English in Bangladesh because it was lot of work and not fun like this country...here I like my class because we do discussion, we do games, we do speaking and listening activities...we never did that in Bangladesh.

(Shafika, FE College)

English is better in this country. We get to do more talking. In Bangladesh we just do reading and writing and teacher do not speak with us in English'...we choose topics at the beginning of term...our teacher suggests some topics and then we vote.

(Rashida, FE college)

Bengali participants expressed preference for those teaching and learning methods such as discussions and presentations that were not used in Bangladeshi learning context. These student-centred learning methods are specifically designed to promote learners' autonomy in the classroom and encourage independent thinking (Nunan, 1992;

Freeman & Freeman,1998). In addition, such methods highlight women's agency since they give women 'voice'.

Women's preference for these methods of teaching also provide a strong counterbalance to the argument that women are passive and 'inactive' as implicitly embedded in policy documents since it is through these methods that women gained confidence and competence in expressing views and opinions on different topics.

My reading of the above extracts describing methods used to teach English would suggest that Bengali female learners feel empowered in the English learning context. In being able to vote on different topics studied in the class Shafika feels she can exercise agency and is given power to speak in the context in which she was originally silenced.

Post-structuralist conceptualisations of identity as subject to change enable us to trace the sites which generated the production of different subjectivities. Here, I want to argue that it is through participants' investment in English that participants were able to express views and opinions on different methods of learning. This investment impacted upon Mani's sense of her own identity.

For example, Mani's conception of herself as a passive recipient of knowledge within the Bengali educational site changed to an active conception of herself with the power to 'impose reception' (Norton 2000). Mani's learning identity is not fixed; it is changed over time. In refusing the low-skilled subject position she aims to use her work placement to enhance her opportunities for a different kind of career path. Although dominant discourses of South Asian femininities come to inflect Bengali women's experiences of education as a result of which women are positioned in a particular way within employability

discourses, participants resisted this and created opportunities to negotiate different subject positions within educational and employability discourses.

The post-structuralist conceptualisation of identity as multiple and contradictory provides an insight into how Afruza positioned herself and was positioned within the English speaking context. To address this point I will draw on the multiple sites of Afruza's identity formation. Recounting her experiences of learning English in Britain, Afruza expressed negative views of student-centred methods of learning and constructed her experience in pathological terms:

I hated when I had to talk in the class ...I feel everybody is looking at me... waiting for me to do a mistake...in Bangladesh we didn't have to speak so much...here it is all about you ... you have to contribute...but I was not ready to do that and it was awful...when I think all those faces looking at me.

(Afruza, FE college)

Despite the fact that Afruza was able to pass ESOL exams in reading and writing, she failed her exams in speaking and listening. Yet, Afruza persevered in her attempts to improve her speaking and listening. It was her change in personal circumstances that compelled her to enter into conversation with officials following the breakdown of her marriage. Here I want to put forward the argument that Afruza's communicative competence developed as a result of her desire to prove to her family that she was able to fend for herself as a single mother:

When I got divorced I knew it wasn't going to be easy...everybody was against it ...my husband found another woman and I couldn't stay in that marriage...my family back home were not happy ... I want divorce...they didn't think I could live on my own in the foreign country and take care of myself and my two children.

(Afruza, FE college)

Afruza's perseverance to learn English intersects with her changed marital status: as a single mother she could no longer depend upon her husband and her extended family to speak on her behalf. Norton's (1995; 2000) conceptualisation of identity as subject to change helps to account for the conditions under which Afruza had to gain 'the power to impose the reception' (Bourdieu, 1997:75). The power to impose reception refers to the symbolic power to be heard as a member of subordinated groups in communication with dominant group members. Afruza commanded this power by positioning herself as worthy to be listened to. This power was further extended in the context of a training provider where Afruza was sent to gain a retail work placement in high street store.

Once I got on a placement in Superdrug I found it difficult at the beginning to mix with people, and talk on my placement ... people speak with different accents and it is difficult to understand but now I feel more confident and yes I can understand them and can help people in the shop.

(Afruza, FE college)

Taking into account a post-structuralist conceptualisation of identity as diverse and dynamic, my reading of the participants' narratives suggests that it is through their investment in ESOL education that female participants were able to carve out a different subject position in educational discourse and set up a counter discourse which positions Bengali women as active rather than passive recipients of ESOL educational policy.

From a post-structuralist perspective, I can argue that Bengali women are engaged in an ongoing struggle between different subject positions that are available in various social sites (Norton, 1995; 2000). However, these sites are imbued with power. Therefore, within post-colonial discourses non-Western education is constructed as inferior

since it is the dominant party (i.e. coloniser) that is in position to declare what counts as a valid form of knowledge (Foucault, 1980). In reproducing views that Bengali education is inferior to Western, women are able to forge different subject positions within the educational discourse.

However, the way in which Bengali women construct themselves within the field of ESOL is at odds with inactive construction within public policy discourses where Bengali female learners are not deemed as legitimate speakers (Bourdieu, 1997: 650) and their views and opinions on what counts as education are silenced.

Within different language learning contexts, such as FE college or training provider, Bengali women's learner identity is multiple rather than unitary. Whilst Bengali female learners' opinions on the value of ESOL education at the FE college are valued as a part of the teaching and learning evaluation process, such views and opinions are marginalised in the policy context. Exploring Bengali female ESOL learners' experiences of education in different contexts in which learning takes place, Bengali women are continuously engaged in the processes of negotiation, resistance, transformation and subversion of different subject positions within different discourses. Drawing upon Norton (1995, 2000) here I have argued that the identity is a site of struggle between different subject positions Bengali women take up in different sites. The continuing struggle of producing identity across various sites highlights the extent to which dominant discourses on South Asian femininities impact upon women's self-representation.

Conclusion

Within this chapter I have argued that through the post-structuralist conceptualisation of identity as fluid and dynamic I can chart the ongoing struggle between different subject positions Bengali women take up in various social sites. Drawing upon Bourdieu's power to impose reception' (1997:75), I have argued that Bengali female participants, despite inequitable power relations with members of dominant social groups, continually negotiate power to impose reception i.e. position themselves as legitimate speakers of the language, therefore continually engage in the process of negotiating, resisting, transforming and subverting dominant discourses through which South Asian femininities are understood.

Chapter 5: Identity as a multiple, contradictory and a site of struggle

Introduction

In this chapter I explore the impact of hegemonic discourses of fixed truths that position South Asian femininities as passive (Brah, 1996; Shain, 2000; Mirza, 2013). I draw upon Foucault's notion of power (1980) to illustrate how some Bengali women resisted passive/inactive positioning within employability discourses and forged a 'third space' within the employability discourse that bypassed 'traditional-modern dichotomy' (Bhopal, 1999).

Forging new spaces within the employability discourse

In addition to interviews at the FE College, I have also conducted interviews at the training provider.

The majority of participants at the training provider reported that the ESOL classes were not adequate in meeting learners' language learning needs. Participants spoke of large mixed ability classes that

were predominantly focused on employability workshops such as CV writing, application forms and interview techniques. Coupled with the frustration of not attending an ESOL class at an appropriate level of study was the mandatory nature of training. All participants on this program were referred to them by job centre advisors. Some participants expressed the fear that if they were to stop attending the training their unemployment benefits would be cut.

At the job centre I was told I had to attend the course and that my benefits at risk ... if I don't go to the course...you know you have to attend the course - the job centre want you to attend and if not my benefits can be cut.

(Fatima, Training provider)

Within this learning site Bengali female learners' experiences of education are articulated through racialised discourses, policies and practices of the government that position black groups within subordinate positions in the society (Brah, 1993; 1996; Shain, 2001; 2003). Engaging in the process of deconstruction of key policy documents such as (BIS, 2010a, b, 2011) in Chapter 1, I argued that ESOL female learners are constructed as 'inactive'. Here the term 'inactive' is a direct reference to those people who are in receipt of unemployment benefits. This narrow construction of learners within the context of the training provider articulates with the contemporary racialised discourses of South Asian femininities that are rooted in Britain's colonialism and imperialism (Brah, 1996: 65).

A Foucauldian (1980) reading of power within the following Bengali women's narratives demonstrates how Bengali women resisted a passive and inactive positioning within the employability discourses. The focus is on those practices that Bengali women implemented in order to forge alternative subject positions. The conceptualisation of identity as multiple, as a site of struggle and subject to change

provides insights into the conditions under which Fatima actively positioned and therefore negotiated her identity through discourse. Fatima, who was referred to the ESOL training opportunity by her JCP advisor, expressed her frustration at having to do the course:

I have attended training provider course before while I was married and I thought it was a waste of time- I just divorced my husband and went to job centre to sign on and they told me to come here to learn English. I was happy...I think this is great but then I come here and they send me on a placement to Poundland and I have to do three-day placement for no money. I come here to learn first and then I can work.

(Fatima, Training provider)

Fatima took up active positioning prior to starting her ESOL training opportunity through Job Centre Plus: she demonstrated resourcefulness and proactively challenged hegemonic understanding of South Asian women by divorcing her husband and seeking benefits through the Job Centre.

Fatima's frustration at being positioned in a passive role at the training provider illustrated the extent to which Western discourses of South Asian women's passivity inflect Bengali women's educational experiences and subjectivities, and the expectations of them. Other studies on the educational and employment opportunities of South Asian women reveal the extent to which external agencies such as careers services and Job Centre Plus are implicated in reproducing particular oppression that South Asian women experience in the job market (Brah1993 b; 1996). Fatima agreed to take part in the placement even though she doubted that the placement would increase her chances of finding paid employment and improve her English language skills.

I was not happy at the placement at Wilkinson...shelving all day...thought there were better things I could do... I spoke to my ESOL teacher who was nice about it and she explained to me that placement was the part of the

program so I said if I want to work I want to work at other place like Superdrug or Boots.

(Fatima, Training Provider)

The self is never stable but continuously shifting in response to particular situations and conditions. Fatima refused the produced knowledge of herself as a passive recipient of ESOL training at the training provider and instead engaged in a process of negotiation with the ESOL teacher to alter her subject position from passive to active. Her practice of negotiating her placement with the ESOL teacher works to produce Fatima as a knowing subject in response to fixed truths that position South Asian femininities as passive (Brah, 1996; Shain, 2000; Mirza, 2013).

Whilst women in this sample did not use words such as racism or discrimination to describe negative experiences of placement at the training provider, some participants voiced a lack of support from teachers and advisers on the schemes.

I was sent here through job centre and was hoping to get to learn English and take my certificates in English... I study English before but not good enough to do job I want...but advisors here sent me on placement at Wilkinson's... I don't ask for a placement in shop...this has nothing to do with what I want to do.

(Mani, Training provider)

As a Business Graduate Mani wanted to enhance her administration skills. She also felt that the placement at Wilkinson's (a household supplies shop) was not building upon her previous work experience as an administrator. Mani refused to attend the placement at Wilkinson and even complained to her job centre advisor that the scheme was inappropriate for her. However, despite voicing her disapproval of the placement, she was firmly advised by her advisor that if she refused to attend the scheme she would not be eligible for unemployment benefits.

Caught up in power relations with the job centre and the staff at the training provider Mani refused to take up the subjectivity offered by a low-skilled job that would overturn her previous positioning as a business administrator. In Mani's case joining an ESOL class was related to gaining a certificate that would provide access to the profession that she felt a member of. Her refusal to accept herself in a subject position that constructs her as low-skilled was an unexpected practice in response to the discursive institutional expectations and pressures upon Mani. Mani's reaction is embedded in specific relations of power and used to destabilise, transform and resist structural positioning.

Not all participants expressed negative views of placements organised by staff. Mistu spoke favourably of her teaching assistant placement at the training provider where she supported learners with lower levels of ability than her own. Her placement arose out of the need to translate for Bengali female learners who spoke limited English. As a result of her placement she felt motivated to do a teaching assistant course. However, her teaching assistant subjectivity emerged from a power struggle with the ESOL teacher who she felt had positioned her narrowly.

I now help the teacher...but it wasn't like that at the beginning...when I first joined the course I felt that the teacher did not want to give me chance to do something different but work in a shop or factory.

(Mistu, Training provider)

Mistu felt that the teacher discouraged her from engaging in professional work opportunities and initially denied her re-entry to a role that she had successfully taken on in the past. Therefore, there was a disjuncture between the teacher's positioning of Mistu and

Mistu's own positioning within the employability discourse. Mistu's desire to gain a professional subjectivity (as a teaching assistant) was linked to her desire to gain access to an imagined community of professionals. Here, I want to argue that in the process of forging new subjectivities Mistu drew upon her pre-migration socio-economic background and her strong educational background to reframe the power relations between her and the teacher. Instead of conceding to the teacher's power to determine her subject position, she resisted the low-skilled subject position on offer and persevered in her attempts to regain her professional identity and 'impose reception' (Bourdieu, 1997). Bourdieu's notion of symbolic power and the right to speak accounts for the power struggle Mistu engaged in with her teacher in order to be listened to and accepted despite concerted efforts on the part of her teacher to undermine her authority.

I volunteered before as a teaching assistant and I knew I could help the teacher with the interpreting...there were lot of Bengali learners coming on the programme and I knew I could help with interpreting...but the teacher at first didn't give me chance...but I kept on asking and then she gave in.

(Mistu, Training provider)

The teacher's initial refusal to position Mistu in a new, more elevated subject position with the potential to use her knowledge, skills and previous educational background is linked to the stereotypical representations of South Asian femininities and the way in which the hegemonic discourses impacted upon Mistu's experience. The teacher's construction of Mistu is confined to the traditional notions of immigrant worker and low skilled employment despite Mistu's previous employment experience in the field of education. The teacher's construction of Mistu alludes to Bhopal's (1997) traditional-modern distinction. Within Bhopal's research the dichotomous distinction between 'traditional' and 'modern' women positions modern

women as single, independent women who are also 'deviant' (Bhopal, 1999: 129).

Mistu forges a subject position that places her outside the confines of traditional-modern dichotomy since it renders traditional 'Asian' home life incompatible with modern 'British' working life. The traditional-modern dichotomy further serves to reinforce the stereotypical representations of South Asian femininities within the private sphere and disadvantage employment opportunities for South Asian femininities.

Brah's (1993; 1996) studies also reported how particular discourses, assumptions and stereotypes about South Asian femininities can have certain impacts for Bengali female participants. Brah (1996:80) argues that the 'culturalist' explanations are used to justify the superiority of Western cultural practices over the 'Non-Western' whilst simultaneously laying the blame at the door of the subordinate groups for their subordination.

Shain's (2000; 2003) studies exploring educational experience of Asian girls in schools also found that some teachers were influenced by the stereotypical assumptions about Asian girls as passive, timid victims of backward cultural practices. This discrimination also continues within the higher education where some teachers did not take South Asian women's educational needs and aspirations seriously and confined their future roles within the domestic sphere (Bagguley & Hussain, 2007).

Within the training provider context the employability focus of ESOL provision highlights the extent to which the provision serves the needs of dominant society since the training opportunities and placements do

not build upon the women's existing skills and aspirations for their futures. This finding supports earlier ESOL case studies on training schemes which fit into what Bernstein calls the performance model of education since it is primarily concerned with outcomes rather than processes (Cooke, 2007; Wallace, 2006). Such a model of education seeks to make training schemes a mechanism for adapting Bengali female learners for the requirements of a hierarchal social structure and the demands of the occupational marketplace. Bengali female learners are constructed as an undifferentiated group of learners with a common set of broad competencies that are required to carry out particular job roles.

What this means in policy terms is that Bengali female learners are positioned as passive recipients of the policy that can be prepared to fill structurally necessary market roles, therefore preparing learners for the existing socioeconomic structure. Women's own perceptions of themselves challenge this inactive representation. By engaging in various practices such as the negotiation of training opportunities and work placements with the training advisors and ESOL teachers these participants are also engaging in processes of challenging oppressive practices of power. Whilst the ESOL programme is more aligned to the needs of society and policy makers (since it aims to fit ESOL learners into menial slots in the occupational structure), Bengali women contest such positionings and therefore create learning and employment opportunities that meet their individual needs.

Conclusion

Within this chapter the data indicated that Bengali female' identities are complex; multiple and continuously shifting overt time and space. I have highlighted the extent to which some Bengali female

participants refused to accept the low-skilled subject positioning within employability discourses and practices by positioning themselves as legitimate speakers of English and demanding that teachers acknowledge this. Teachers' construction of Bengali female participants within the training provider drew upon hegemonic discourses of South Asian femininities that promote stereotypical representations of South Asian femininities within the private sphere and acted to disadvantage their employment opportunities. Such constructions of South Asian femininities also highlight the extent to which external agencies contribute to processes of marginalising of South Asian femininities within employability discourses. However, an analysis of the data provided here seems to suggest that some Bengali female participants destabilise, transform and resist the low-skilled structural positioning conferred upon them by challenging inequitable power relations and 'imposing reception' (Bourdieu, 1977:75) thereby positioning themselves as legitimate speakers of English and demanding to be heard in contexts in which Bengali women are routinely silenced.

Chapter 6: Teachers' construction of Bengali female learners within ESOL

Introduction

This chapter explores the hegemonic discourses circulating about South Asian femininities and how teachers take these up in their constructions of Bengali female learners. It builds upon Bengali female participants' data in Chapter 6 which highlighted the extent to which external agencies contribute to processes of marginalisation of Bengali female learners within employability discourses.

Moving beyond stereotypical assumptions?

In total, four one-to-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with teaching staff across two organisations involved in the delivery of ESOL to Bengali female learners. The focus of these interviews was on teachers' views of the purpose of ESOL, the perceived effectiveness of the methods used to meet external funding body requirements, wider policy agendas and learners' aspirations. In conducting interviews with the staff I was particularly interested to explore the extent to which, if any, popular discourses of South Asian femininities impacted upon teacher's construction of Bengali female learners in the context of in which they worked.

In giving their views on the purpose of ESOL all teachers noted the significant shift towards an employability focus as articulated within the Skills for Life agenda and the extent to which it impacted upon their everyday teaching practices. Their comments resonate with Wallace (2006) and Cooke's (2007) argument that the ESOL model of education does not attempt to meet a learner's aspirations if they extend beyond economic constraints of the policy (as discussed in the policy context of literature review).

John, a teacher from the FE institution, was somewhat frustrated with this shift in focus since he felt that he was taking on the role of a job centre advisor and guiding his learners towards employment when, in his opinion, this group of learners was not necessarily ready to take up employment:

I resent the employability focus... isn't this what JCP is for? ... before 2007 when this agenda really took hold of the FE sector I had greater input into what goes on in the classroom before I was able to create the scheme of work that reflects collaboration between the students and me ...now my hands are tied...I must include...starting from entry three more work-based activities such as CV workshops, interview techniques and application forms that would prepare students for the real world... I find this statement

laughable since some of them have never worked before and have nothing to put on their CVs.

(John, FE teacher)

In the context of an employability agenda John's construction of his learners alludes to negative construction of Bengali female learners as 'deficient, lacking and inactive'. Even though his comment 'some of them have never worked before and have nothing to put on their CVs' did not necessarily single out Bengali female learners, the significant representation of Bengali learners in the class implies direct reference to this group of learners. However, I do not want to suggest that this construction of Bengali learners was intentional; it was made in response to the purpose of ESOL education and the way in which its focus has marginalised women's language needs in favour of gaining employability skills.

In reproducing the construction offered within ESOL policy of these learners as deficient and lacking, John fails to take into account the wide heterogeneity of the learners, many of whom have highly educated backgrounds, professional experience and related qualifications. He unintentionally reinforces the views of policy makers and constructs learners as 'deficient rather than a resource' (Hamilton & Hillier, 2009:4).

Such constructions of Bengali women reproduce stereotypical assumptions about South Asian women captured within discourses that can be traced back to the colonial and imperial past and are reflected in the structural inequalities that South Asian women face on a daily basis (Brah, 1993; 1996; Shain, 2000; 2003).

Talking about the effectiveness of teaching and learning methods John expressed a strong preference for student-centred methods such as

discussions and presentations. He felt that these methods were particularly effective for Bengali female learners since they gave this group of learners confidence to express their views and opinions:

It's easy to get carried away with my own excitement in creating scheme of work or with my own a perspective on an issue...Once I have some ideas about students' wants and needs, I do what we all do here place the themes on a list and ask students to vote on which topic to cover next...I find this method very empowering...they can discuss what themes to do next.

(John, FE teacher)

In specifying a preference for student-centred methods of teaching there is an assumption that these methods are effective for these learners because they are empowering. This view was echoed by Bengali female participants (Chapter 4 on Bengali women's previous educational experiences) who felt these methods of teaching and learning gave them a voice in the classroom and increased their confidence. Whilst both Bengali participants and John concurred those student-centred methods of teaching are the most preferable, I found John's justification for the use of these methods problematic. If such a notion had not been voiced by a white, middle-class male who represents the majority in a dominant society my interpretation of John's account would have nevertheless been more sympathetic.

He also drew on Bengali women's Muslim background and encouraged these learners to give presentations on their traditions:

I often highlight Muslim culture and holidays and ask Bengali students if they are willing to present their traditions, since other students in the class lack of knowledge of the words Muslim, and Ramadan.

(John, FE teacher)

The views expressed in this quote are problematic since it homogenises all Bengali women as Muslim. Brah (1996) draws

attention to wide heterogeneity of South Asian women's backgrounds in terms of culture, caste, religious and linguistic backgrounds. Even though the overwhelming majority of Bengalis are Muslim, some practise other religions such as Buddhism, Christianity and Hinduism and others no religion at all.

John's attempts to familiarise other students with Muslim traditions and holidays promote the view that ethnic cultures are monolithic, definable and resonant of multicultural discourses that have been dismissed by feminists for reifying, homogenising ethnic group boundaries rather addressing the structural inequalities (Yuval-Davis, 1997). Implementation of multicultural policy within education has been lambasted for reproducing stereotypical views of minority ethnic groups where the focus is on typical cultural symbols (the 'Saris, samosas and steel bands syndromes') (Troyna 1987).

Homogenising representations of a culture supports static representations of Asian communities as incapable of change: 'British Asian culture are not simply a carry-over from the country of origin' (Brah, 1993: 448-9). In her analysis of young British Asian women Brah (1993) argues that structure and culture are interconnected. Whilst she resists downplaying the impact patriarchal discourses have upon the lives of South Asian women, she argues that such discourses need to be understood in relation to wider social formations that recognise both class differences and the influence of racism.

In making assumptions that all Bengali learners are Muslim and encouraging presentations on minority ethnic cultures as homogenous John objectifies these learners. His comments illustrate the extent to which dominant discourses on South Asian femininities shape Bengali women's educational experiences and subjectivities. These prominent

discourses deny multiple subject positions that Bengali women take up in the discourse of education and homogenise women as timid, passive victims of culture. On the basis of these pathologising models of culture a rather fixed, static notion of ethnic identity is produced where interests of dominant groups are represented as the universal interest of all groups.

Similar views of Bengali women as passive recipients of culture were reproduced by a Bengali teacher of English who at the time of interviews was approaching retirement age. Fatima spoke of her own professional journey 'that was bit of an accident'. She described the early days of ESOL education as a volunteer. She also volunteered to interpret and help her own community:

I first started working as ESOL teacher in the 1970s. It was voluntary at first. I felt I had to do something for my own community...I could see why these women wanted to learn English and not spend all their time at home...where they start feeling trapped and getting depressed because they are isolated
(Fatima, Training provider teacher)

Fatima lays claim to represent the women's cause since she shares cultural and religious identities with Asian women. Parmar (1990) refers to it as the 'burden of representation' since Asian teachers are expected to represent Asian women in educational institutions despite having different priorities. As an insider-outsider Fatima feels she can add some authority to the view that patriarchal culture restricts women's movement and confines women within the private sphere. Such an account of women's positioning disavows other realities and distracts attention from other structural factors and ultimately fails to account for the everyday lives of Bengali women as constituted through interconnecting discourses of culture, gender, and race.

In speaking about Bengali women's aspirations for the future, Fatima noted that the learners on her programme have high aspirations but may have come across extended family objections.

They all want to do something with their lives...which is quite admirable but have to think how to juggle it with their domestic responsibilities...it is not easy for them confronting the in-laws and telling them they want to work...in our culture it is considered shameful if the man cannot provide for the woman.

(Fatima, Training provider teacher)

In these accounts Fatima confines South Asian femininities within the domestic sphere and describes the struggle some women may have with in-laws to negotiate the entry to the labour market.

In chapter 3 (section 3.4) I highlighted the extent to which Bengali female participants challenge, transform and traverse an anticipated domestic role by engaging in processes of negotiation with in-laws and spouses. Whilst Fatima's account is partially accurate it is contingent upon specificities of time, space, generation, class and etc.

Fatima reproduces dominant discourses in her accounts whereby woman doing paid work outside the home came to constitute a social stigma. As previously discussed the notion of 'purdah' refers to a range of norms regarding regulating South Asian femininities (Brah 1993; 1996). However, Fatima's account of *purdah* fails to consider the way it is interpreted by different families since the woman going to work may not necessarily bring family's *izzat* (honour) into disrepute (Brah, 1993; 1996). Fatima's account reprises culturalist explanations and as a representative of the culture fails to take into account the complexities, ambiguities and contradictions I have sought to highlight through my research. Entry into employment for Bengali women is not defined solely by ideologies but by a raft of the structural inequalities

that marginalise South Asian women's positions within the labour market.

Exploring the teachers' constructions of female Bengali ESOL learners
I have argued that these accounts were firmly rooted in the cultural pathology framework whereby the culture was presented as static and incapable of change. Various cultural and religious practices were recalled in these accounts to objectify women as passive, deficient and lacking, thus denying different subject positions these women may take up to negotiate in education discourses, in unexpected and agentic ways.

Teachers' stereotyped perceptions and low expectations of South Asian femininities, aspirations and abilities limit the educational and employment opportunities made available to Bengali female participants in both sites of research. Fatima, as a representative of Asian culture, implicitly refers to various cultural practices as *pardah* and *izzat* as responsible for the relegation of women to the domestic sphere that act as a deterrent from pursuing any meaningful and sustainable career opportunities.

Within feminist discourses such stereotypes have been challenged and recognised as racist since they shift focus away from structural inequalities by presenting culture, and in particular family, as the sources of Bengali women's problems (Brah & Minhas, 1986; Brah, 1993; Shain, 2000; 2003).

Conclusion

Having already highlighted the extent to which external agencies adhere to requirements of a hierarchical social structure in the

previous chapter, this chapter has explored teachers' construction of Bengali female learners within the ESOL educational context. An analysis of the data reveals that teachers' construction of Bengali women reproduces stereotypical assumptions about Bengali female learners that homogenise this group as passive, timid victims of culture. Within teachers' accounts the wide heterogeneity of Bengali female learners is homogenised since they are based on pathological models of culture as monolithic, definable and incapable of change (Brah, 1993; Yuval -Davis, 1997).

Chapter 7: Employment aspirations of Bengali women

Introduction

In the previous two chapters I have highlighted the extent to which external agencies promote and reinscribe hegemonic discourses of South Asian femininities. In Chapter Six such hegemonic expectations, which are encompassed in dominant discourses, are troubled by Bengali female participants at both research sites. Some Bengali participants are actively engaged in carving out different subject positions within the employability discourse, therefore forging a 'third space' (Hall, 1992; Khan, 1988; Gilroy, 1992; Spivak, 1999).

In this chapter by exploring Bengali women's aspirations I focus upon those accounts which highlight the existence and emergence of counter discourses.

Transcending male-female gender binaries

Within the intersecting discourses of employability, patriarchy, race and gender I demonstrate the way in which Bengali women forge alternative subject positions and highlight the extent to which the

investment in ESOL enables women to make transitions from marginalised to active positions, voice concerns over structural inequalities and discrimination that permeate women's everyday experiences. In gaining insights into the extent to which women feel discriminated against in the workplace I felt that my researcher subject position was shifting from that of *ghair* to *apna* since it is argued that women are more likely to express views and experiences of racism to women of the same racial and cultural background (Archer, 2003; Essed, 1990).

All women interviewed at both sites expressed desire to gain employment in the future. At the time of interviews four college participants were in part-time employment, whereas five training provider participants were on work placements. The themes of financial independence, greater self-esteem and confidence resonated throughout when Bengali women on both sites spoke of the importance of working full time.

Earning money enabled some women to negotiate different subject positions within marriage:

I work part time and this gives me some independence from my husband ... I hope in the future to be able to work full time so I have even more independence from my husband...and I have more respect from my in-laws.

(Tequila, FE college)

This would seem to be supported by other studies documenting the importance of paid work for South Asian women in gaining independence and confidence as well as gaining greater control over one's own marriage and in-laws. (Ahmad, 2003; Bhopal, 1997; Brah, 1993; 1996)

Rashida, a college participant, who was working as a part time teaching assistant at her son's school, felt that gaining some income placed her on an equal footing with her husband:

In our culture it is expected for men to go to work but I think that it is important that women contribute too – to earn money means I can spend how I want it and not giving to my husband or my mother in law- it is my money and I can spend it on me and my son.

(Rashida, FE college)

Those women who were not in employment quoted childcare responsibilities, discrimination in the labour market and lack of fluency in spoken English as the main reasons for not engaging in full-time paid work opportunities. ANISSA's (2005) report purports that women do not perceive employment as a priority and make conscious decisions to stay at home to look after children. In Ahmad, *et al.*'s (2003) study participants also spoke of preferences to take on childcare responsibilities rather than leaving children with a stranger.

Other studies support the finding that low levels of English and discrimination in accessing job opportunities are major contributing factors to low rates of activity among South Asian women (Dale, *et al.* 2002; Heath & Cheung, 2006; Modood, *et al.*1997). Religious and/or cultural constraints were not quoted by women as a reason for their unemployment. Such a finding is in stark contrast to studies which propose religion as a main factor for low economic activity amongst South Asian women where women are firmly located within the domestic sphere (Quilliam Foundation, 2009).

The theme of discrimination came up in several accounts: some training provider participants expressed frustration at not being able to locate positions commensurate with their skills, qualities and

qualifications. The consensus amongst training provider participants was that placements organised by the training provider were considered to be beneath their employability potential and therefore irrelevant to future aspirations:

I don't want to spend my time on placements organised by training schemes...they are waste of time and energy. They only offer us jobs nobody wants.

(Tara, Training provider)

Tara's negative construction of training schemes as 'a waste of time and energy' discloses the extent to which such agencies are involved in reproducing structural inequalities that position women at the lowest levels of all fields of employment. Such views are produced in other studies exploring South Asian women's experiences of training schemes (Brah, 1993; 1996, Mirza, 1997). By way of illustration, Tara spoke of her frustration at taking part in retail placement that fails to take into account her skills and qualifications:

I do not want to be on a training scheme where I need to do a placement that is well below my abilities and skills. As a mother I couldn't work before but now I don't want to work in a Poundland for the minimum wage. I've got more to offer than that.

(Tara, Training provider)

Tara's account illustrates the extent to which such training schemes can be constructed as exploitative since Asian women have little English to oppose them, she goes on to explain:

Many Asian women work in low paid jobs and attend placement such as one I was offered here...they think women in our culture do not work but stay at home and look after children...but women cannot complain as they speak little English and are afraid they will lose their benefits.

(Tara, Training provider)

Tara discursively distanced herself from other Asian women who may not have shared her social and educational background or language speaking abilities. Her construction of Asian women as having little input into the training aspect of these schemes (due to a limited ability to converse in English) further serves to reinforce the stereotypes of passive South Asian femininities. Dominant discourses of South Asian women impact upon the way in which these women are constructed within the British labour market as 'passive, inhibited' and 'ideal sweatshop fodder' (Wrench, 1987: 179). However, Tara's account also raises the extent to which South Asian women are disadvantaged, discriminated and stereotyped in employment because of the intersections of gender and race which is well reported in feminist literature (Ahmad *et al.* 2003; Bhavnani, Mirza & Meeto, 2005).

Despite compulsory attendance on a scheme well below her level of abilities Tara was working towards a future self and was able to imagine belonging to a professional community within which her skills would come to prominence. Tara's communicative competence enabled her to challenge her subjective positioning as a low-skilled worker as well as develop an 'awareness of how to challenge and transform practice of marginalisation' (Norton, 1995:25).

As an Economics graduate Tara, like a training provider participant Mistu, resisted a low-skilled subjective positioning requiring little knowledge to perform the role that was conferred upon her within the employability discourse. Her lower middle-class background and graduate identity intersects with her learner identity at the training provider. It is Tara's background that gives her confidence to question the suitability of the placements offered on the training scheme. However, Tara's construction of the self as a highly skilled graduate is in contrast to the ways in which she is positioned within the

employability discourse. Tara has been identified as a person ‘in need of training’ despite her graduate background. Within the employability discourse the low knowledge skilled learner is implicitly constructed in terms of social class, gender, ethnicity and citizenship (Brine, 2006). By contrast the identity of the high knowledge-skilled learner entails, by definition, reverse characteristics of the other: a white, middle-class, male, British citizen. Puwar (2004:8) argues that there is a connection between bodies and space. Representing the somatic norm middle-class British men have an ‘undisputed right’ to dominate the financial sector whereas minority women found in such sectors are read as ‘space invaders’. Regardless of her qualifications, education and prior work experience, Tara would be deemed out of place in the financial sector solely based on the observable traits associated with her race and gender. Puwar’s concept of space invaders captures the extent to which the human body is constructed through social and political practices. Even if Tara was to secure a position within the financial sector position (as she aspires to) it remains a sector from which ethnic minority women have been traditionally excluded, she would likely be constructed as ‘out of place’ or even as ‘a trespasser’ (Puwar, 2004).

In terms of her future aspiration Tara wanted to gain employment in the financial sector. During the interview, she claimed she wanted to study further and finally take an accounting course with the view of gaining employment in the financial sector.

I am doing this placement but as soon as I finish I want to study Accounting course – I will have to sponsor myself so I may have to do a part time job first.

(Tara, Training provider)

Endeavouring to enter the financial sector that by definition is principally occupied by high knowledge skilled learner (i.e white,

middle-class, British men), Tara is aware of the ensuing struggle she would need to engage with in order to gain employment since her minority status would subject her to additional negative expectations and pressures.

As an Asian I know that I have to work so much harder ... it is difficult for an Asian woman to succeed in financial sector.

(Tara, Training provider)

Minority status women entering male dominated spaces are subjected to higher degrees of scrutiny (Puwar, 2004). It is women's minority position that may give women a heightened sense of not being the natural occupiers of these positions. Participants in Ahmad's (2001:147) study also spoke of racial discrimination in the workplace which affected employment opportunities for ethnic minorities: participants spoke of 'needing to be better' than white counterparts.

Polly, a college participant, also spoke of her desire to work in a bank:

I want to do Accounts management, if I complete my ESOL course, do my A levels course I want to work in the bank -it's good job because everyone works for the council and I don't want to do that ... in our country all men are doing banking but no women - all men work in the bank so that's why I fix my mind all I want to do is work in the bank.

(Polly, FE college)

By aiming to enter what has been constructed as a male dominated environment in Bangladesh, Polly aims to subvert her subject position within the patriarchal discourse whereby the idealised notion of femininity is restricted to domestic sphere. In embracing the vocational purpose of education and aiming to further her career within the traditionally male sphere she positions her future self-outside male-female gendered binaries underpinned by discourses of tradition, culture and natural biological differences. Polly dismisses

her husband's work for the Local Authority as irrelevant since 'everybody works for the council'. She further challenges the conceptualisation of Bangladeshi masculinity through 'a breadwinner identity' (Brah, 1993; 1996) which is associated with the world of work and providing for the family.

It is possible to discern from the interview data how women's investments in the ESOL class at both sites had linked to achieving symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1984) both in terms of future educational and employment opportunities. ESOL classes enhanced opportunities for different kinds of career paths that could position women in new subject positions or make a transition from a low skilled position into a more prestigious occupation. Therefore, such investment into education went beyond patriarchal ideologies of women as 'homemakers' consigned to the domestic sphere.

Within both research sites it is through the investment into language learning opportunities that women are able to negotiate different subject positions, exercise agency and transform and traverse accepted conceptualisations of subject positions within the constraints of multiple and intersecting inequalities.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored Bengali female participants' employment aspirations that bypass the male-female gender binaries underpinned by discourses of tradition, cultural and natural biological differences. Some Bengali female participants chose purposefully to pursue careers within the traditionally male sphere, therefore aiming to open up alternative spaces that are not naturally reserved for women of ethnic, minority background. Women in this sample demonstrated awareness that forging alternative subject positions within the

financial or accounting field of employment would not come naturally as they would be constructed as ‘out of place’ or even as ‘a trespasser’ (Puwar, 2004). In this chapter I have argued that ESOL classes play a key role in enabling women to forge different career paths and therefore set up counter discourses that position Bengali women in powerful rather than marginal subject positions.

Chapter 8: The role of dress in paving a way for the ‘third space’

Introduction

In this final data chapter, I look at the role of dress, in particular the veil as an overdetermined signifier of Muslim identity amongst Bengali women. Cutting through the data I identify instances where Bengali participants purposefully fused Asian and Western styles of clothing to unsettle fixed and hegemonic readings of Asian/ Western attire.

The fusion of Western and Asian style of clothing: creation of ‘hybrid or third spaces’

Within Islamophobic discourses the veil has come to symbolise Islamic backwardness and primitivism (Ahmad, 2003). Muslim women have increasingly come under the spotlight since the veil wearing practice has been perceived as a refusal to integrate within the multicultural society (Ahmad, 2003).

As argued in the literature review, the lives of South Asian women have been characterised by the ‘culturist model’ whereby the culture has been presented as the source of problems and conflict (Parmar, 1982; Brah & Minhas, 1985). Such an approach fails to account for the complex ways in which religious and ethnic identities are constructed

and the extent to which lives of South Asian women are structured thorough racialised and gendered hegemonic discourses.

Here I want to argue that within these culturalist discourses the lives of South Asian women are structured through a set of binary oppositions which are resonant of post-colonialist West versus Rest discourse (Said, 1979; Hall, 1982). Placing Asian/English styles of clothes within a post-colonialist framework, the Asian dress is reflective of 'tradition' and 'ethnic' culture (Dwyer, 2010), whereas 'English clothes' are markers of freedom and active, rebellious femininities. Such oppositions mirror the West v Rest discourse since Western clothes are represented as more progressive and superior and as a direct reflection of Western culture (Bhattacharyya, 1991) meanwhile Asian clothes are reflective of a static and 'backward' patriarchal culture which represses South Asian femininities (Gilroy, 1991). What is problematic with this dichotomous representation of Asian and English styles of dress is that both Asian and English style of clothing are represented as homogeneous categories that are used to determine the subjective identities of individuals.

Considering the focus of my study is to open spaces for non-hegemonic readings of Bengali femininities here I want to focus on Asian clothes as a marker of difference and identify deliberate strategies employed by the participants to counteract hegemonic readings of Bengali femininities.

Cutting through the data I have also isolated accounts of the role that dress plays in the construction of women's identities by challenging meanings attached to it by others and therefore unsettling fixed, stable and bounded readings of Asian/Western style of clothing.

The majority of participants interviewed at the college fused and crossed over Asian and Western clothing: thus women were experimenting with the construction of alternative femininities. The fusion of Western and Asian styles of clothing amongst Bengali female participants signals a diversity of styles and possibilities of 'hybrid identities' which are characterised by mixing different cultural influences (Hall, 1992a; 1992 b). In being able to explore women 's identities through different dress styles 'hybrid spaces' or 'third spaces' can be created that offer opportunities for 'a new negotiation of meaning and representation' that bypass culturalist models (Bhabha, 1990:211).

Some participants in particular chose this style of clothing to avoid being constructed as 'different'. For example, Mani, a participant at the training provider made a conscious effort to unsettle dominant conceptions of South Asian femininities by highlighting the potential of dress to 'confuse or contradict static constructions' (Puwar, 1994:38). She alternated between Asian and Western style of clothing as she was concerned that if she resorted solely to Asian styles of clothing she would be constructed by the training provider staff as a 'typical Asian woman' who stayed at home and looked after children:

I deliberately chose to wear Western clothes- I do not feel that is disrespectful to my religion...I chose to cover myself and I don't wear anything revealing like short skirts or tight tops, but when I wear the shalwar kameez on days off people always ask me questions about the clothes. I feel that when I am wearing Asian clothes English people think I am typical of my culture.

(Mani, Training provider)

Wearing different styles of dress for home and work, Mani negotiated different subject positions within the private and public sphere. She chose the Western clothing to negotiate her entry to the imagined world of professionals. In experimenting with alternative styles of

clothing for different occasions she challenged and unsettled dichotomies between Western and Asian clothing and meaning attached to them (Dwyer, 1999a). Moving beyond essentialised identities Mani problematized the binary opposition between Asian clothing associated with morality and purity and Western clothing reflective of westernisation and active sexuality. Her choice of dress is also reflective of her lower middle-class positioning since her description of a 'typical Asian woman' was reserved for women who opted for the most traditional Asian style of clothing, and therefore were associated with women who were more likely to have rural working-class backgrounds. In her study Dwyer (2010) also found that women of urban background were more likely to construct an alternative 'hybrid' identity, which challenged the essentialised meanings assigned to Asian/English style of dress.

Both research sites presented safe spaces within which women could experiment with their clothing to articulate alternative subjectivities; some women alternated between wearing and not wearing headscarves. In the confines of the interview room some women chose to take off a headscarf only to put it back on in the college corridor. On the other hand, some women chose to combine a headscarf with the more Westernised style of clothing such as long skirt rather than more traditional tunic trousers, whereas others would wear *niqab* and *burqa*. Different veil wearing practices as well as choice of dress are reflective of different axes of differentiation such as class, race and ethnicity (Brah, 1996).

In alternating with different styles of clothing women refused to be positioned within a homogenous Asian category or in Mani's words to be positioned within the category of a 'typical Asian woman'. Moreover, women's experimentation with different styles of dress also

emphasises the agency exercised by individuals and the extent to which women negotiated multiple subject positions in relation to wider racialised and gendered discourses. Such reworking of different styles of clothing highlights that identities as well as cultural styles are not homogenous, culturally bounded categories, rather they draw attention to the instabilities of oppositional identities and transgress previous ethnic boundaries and fuse aspects of different cultures. However, individuals cannot exercise agency over the way in which different styles of dress, in particular the veil wearing practices are read by others.

Here I want to recount an incident I observed at the college. While waiting for my participant to sign in at the college I saw her coming in with a black colleague of hers who in jest tried to pull off her *niqab*. The participant who was subjected to this incident calmly pulled the niqab back on her face and walked off. It was the participant's reaction to the incident that made me think that this was not an isolated incident. Moreover, even though this incident was witnessed by other members of staff at the college, nobody chose to interfere or raise the matter as unacceptable. The lack of intervention could be interpreted as being complicit in a racist attack within an inclusive college environment and serves to highlight the new shifting and complex nature of racism (Gilroy, 1987). However, it also raises the debate as to how to deal with the racism that is less explicit from the traditional displays of overt racist behaviour.

In the privacy of the interview room the participant confirmed to me that the incident I had just witnessed was one of many she routinely dealt with in her everyday life:

Becca, (her classmate who was involved in the veil lifting incident)- does this all the time – she is always trying to lift my veil ... for her it is bit of fun

but it is really not nice for me.. but I am used to this ...people shout at me in the street and my friends and relatives also go through this.

(Shamima, FE college)

In choosing to ignore this racist incident and dismissing it as an everyday occurrence it could be argued that Shamima's response can be read as a 'natural' way of reproducing traditional feminine ideals of inaction. Here, I want to argue that it is through a lack of acknowledgment of what is an undoubtedly racist attack Shamima mobilises the discourse of hegemonic femininity. Shamima's continual persistence in wearing a veil in this case represents a counter discourse and a form of resistance to my positioning of Shamima within the passive 'victim' role. The unwelcome attention from a student on the course did not stop Shamima from wearing the veil. In addition to the symbolic representation of Islamic identity the veil wearing can be reworked as a form of defiance to racist incidents.

Having analysed the role of dress and in particular the veil in the construction of alternative Bengali female subjectivities, I want to finish this section by reflecting upon my own role as a researcher. Whilst I felt privileged to discuss the issues of racism with the participant, I am also aware that I was the one who raised the incident in the interview and that without the prompting on my part, the participant would not have necessarily raised the matter herself. This incident made me question once again if as a white researcher I am reproducing the dominant power relations within the research process as I am only able to gain limited understandings of racism. However, as a white Eastern European woman my sense of belonging has also been questioned within the professional field since I, as a white other teacher, have also experienced non-inclusionary practices and have been positioned by others as a non-legitimate ESOL tutor. Hence, the journey I have made in this research process that was characterised

by difference from the outset, from that of *ghair* to *apna* was facilitated by experiences of being ‘othered’ in discourse of education.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have considered the role of dress in the construction of Bengali women’s identities. Some women in this sample chose to alternate between Asian and Western style of clothing, while others chose to fuse both styles of clothing. By experimenting with alternative styles of clothing women were able to articulate alternative subjectivities. I have argued that in fusing/alternating Asian and Western style of clothing women were troubling the dichotomous representation of Asian and English style of dress and able to construct an alternative ‘hybrid’ identity.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

In this final chapter I summarise my findings, consider the limitations of this research and propose further research on Bengali female learners. I start by summarising the findings regarding female Bengali women’s experiences of learning English and the way in which dominant hegemonic discourses, assumptions and stereotypes of South Asian femininities impact upon the way in which these participants are positioned within the discourse of ESOL education.

In conducting this study my aim was to open up new spaces for a range of non-hegemonic readings of Bengali subjectivities and to highlight how particular social and cultural practices and interplay of class, race and gender come to be entangled with educational experiences of these learners and potentially lead to social and educational inequalities. The main aim of the study was to identify the

strategies and practices employed by Bengali women to interrupt abiding educational inequalities and exclusions. The focus of the study was on the representation of Bengali women as agentic and complex, therefore bypassing any simplistic, pathologising stereotypes which dominate hegemonic discourses of South Asian femininities. Providing a nuanced account, I identified practices where Bengali female participants drew on and reproduced dominant discourses as well as counter discourses to challenge assumptions, stereotypes and definitions borne by hegemonic discourses. Highlighting moments of conformity as well as resistance identities are illustrated as shifting, fluid and culturally, socially and politically context specific (Brah, 1996; Lawler, 2008; Weedon, 1987).

I have made use of Foucault's concept of productive power to make sense of processes through which Bengali women come to occupy certain positions. Foucault's deployment of knowledge, the subject and power provided useful tools to enable me to identify practices and resistances employed by the women to forge alternative subject positions within prevailing discourses. In Foucauldian terms knowledge is understood as ultimately linked to power. The subject is understood not as pre-existing but is continuously shifting in response to particular discourses. The subject is simultaneously rendered to be a subject of and subjected to relations of power in discourse (Foucault, 1990). Discourses are infused with power/knowledge and play a key role in producing new power/knowledge networks. Discourses are both constitutive and productive.

Whilst the hegemonic discourse of South Asian femininities constructs a particular version of women as passive and timid, such discourses are being meditated by other discourses (race, gender, education, patriarchy and femininity) which produce new ways of thinking and

new 'truths' –therefore Foucault's (1990) account of discourse highlights the potential for meanings of discourses to shift and/or for less dominant discourses to subvert these.

In drawing upon Foucauldian concepts I identify the use of strategies and resistances Bengali women employed to negotiate, resist and subvert passive positioning within prevailing discourses and therefore delineate the ways in which the women negotiated, constructed and challenged various possible versions of what it means to be a Bengali female learner in the context of ESOL education.

Conducting research in two institutions I was able to contrast the extent to which the employability agenda of ESOL policy, particularly prominent in the context of the training provider, has served to construct ESOL learners as deficient and lacking and thereby reinscribe the hegemonic policy discourses. Drawing upon Brine's (2006) division of ESOL learners into the high knowledge-skilled learner (graduate/postgraduate) and low knowledge-skilled learners, I have argued that such a dichotomy is both classed and raced. Despite graduate backgrounds, Bengali female learners are categorised as 'low knowledge skilled learner' due to a lack of recognition of the Bangladeshi educational system by external government agencies. Entering British educational system as ESOL learners, I have argued here, the Bengali female learners are constructed as 'Non- Western Other' (Said, 1979). Such constructions of Bengali female learners are reproduced in the ESOL policy discourses (BIS, 2010a; 2010b; 2011) whereby women are objectified as 'inactive' due to low economic activity. Such a positioning is a reflection of wider societal and political inequalities that place subordinate groups at the lowest rungs of the gender-segregated labour market (Brah, 1993; 1996).

The publically inscribed subjectivities of the Bengali female participants who participated in this study can be understood as determined by culture. The notion of culture is used to stereotype heterogeneous group of Bengali women with diverse educational and employment backgrounds. Homogenisation of this group of learners serves to disguise structural inequalities. By invoking discourse of a specific, unitary and homogenised culture teachers and trainers of Bengali participants in this study unequivocally align their views on Bengali femininities with the policy makers and prevailing discourses in either undermining women's abilities or confining them to narrowly prescriptive roles. However, exploring women's educational and employment trajectories in both sites of research I have found that Bengali female learners have drawn upon, resisted, rejected and subverted such discourses. Post-structuralist conceptualisations of identity as never stable but continuously shifting subjectivities as a site of multiple constructions of identity allowed a focus on those practices employed by Bengali female participants that may unsettle or subvert prevailing hegemonic discourses (Brah, 1986; Lawler, 2008; Weedon, 1987). Bengali women's discursive data contributes to creation of 'third spaces' or 'hybrid spaces' within which new identities and ethnicities are formed to protect women from 'otherness' that is conferred upon women through prevailing hegemonic discourses (Bhabha, 1990). 'Third spaces', which signal shifts in cultural meanings that occur through colonisation and diaspora, offer possibilities for reworking and resisting notions of passivity, inactivity and docility assigned to women within popular media and some white academic discourses.

Despite the heterogeneity of the sample being constrained by enduring discourses on South Asian femininities, these participants are not

devoid of agency or a capacity for action. It is through their investment in ESOL that participants are able to overturn previously marginalised positions and challenge discourses that underpin such practices. ESOL classes equip these participants with confidence to challenge previously subordinated positions in both public and private spheres and implement those practices that can subvert passive positioning as reproduced through official policies and the opinions and views of some teachers/trainers' on Bengali femininities. It is through a focus on these practices that leads to the identification of counter- discourses that I can see new possibilities for unsettling the links between class, race, gender and educational and employment inclusions for Bengali women within the current geographical, socio-economic context in which my research was undertaken.

This study aimed to contribute to non-pathologising accounts of Bengali femininities that open up alternative constructions of Asian femininities to unsettle, reverse and displace hegemonic discourses. In providing individual accounts of Bengali female participants I have attempted to convey the connections between wider social inequalities, discourses and women's experiences of ESOL education.

Drawing upon a post-colonial, black feminist perspective my study has privileged the voices that have been marginalised through a process of colonisation (Bhabha, 1994; Hall, 1996; Spivak, 1998). It has acknowledged that subjugated knowledges that have traditionally been excluded from the knowledge making process can open up spaces from which different claims to truth can be forged (Bhabha, 1994; Foucault, 1980; hooks, 1984).

Drawing upon the post-structuralist conceptualisations of identity, this study has further contributed to the non-essentialist, hybridised conceptualisations of identity as constantly in the 'process of becoming' (Alexander, 1996; Brah, 1999; Norton, 2000; Weedon, 1987) in the process acknowledging the role of interconnecting and competing discourses of class, race, gender, patriarchy and femininity (Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Brewster, 1993; Gedalof, 1999; Phoenix, 1994). Moving beyond the narrow conceptualisations of identity, culture, 'race', class and gender, this study aims to provide the policy makers with less oppressive knowledges and understandings of Asian femininities that would bring current discourses about class, race and gender into dispute: the place from the margins, 'the place of a pain' remains a powerful place from which the new knowledge forms can be generated (hooks, 1984).

The aims of this study stem from my professional experience of working with Bengali female learners in the context of a training provider. Questioning and challenging the very discourses which I have perceived to be pathologising, I have privileged accounts from my data that provide counter-discourses to the hegemonic discourses that prevail. Hence, this study is firmly grounded in a social justice agenda since it remains reflective of wider social inequalities that impede upon education and employment experiences of Bengali women.

To conclude, there is still much more work needed to recognize that issues of 'race', 'racism' are not solely issues concerning South

Asian femininities but affect other marginalised groups more broadly within a given society. This study has highlighted how, new subtle forms of racism that focus on culture, subject Bengali women to processes of inferiorisation and discrimination in different research sites.

Whilst this study could be read as an attempt to provide an in-depth understanding of South Asian femininities such an approach could be equated with the colonialist desire of 'othering' Bengali femininities within the academic theory and practice (Ahmad, 1999).

This study does not provide a definitive reading of Bengali femininities within the context of further education, nor does it make the South Asian femininities more 'knowable'. What makes such an approach problematic is that it rests upon reductive notions of knowledge. Instead this study aims to challenge simplistic, homogenised stereotypical discourses that abound about South Asian femininities and it creates room or a 'third space' to offer possibilities for the articulation of alternative femininities and social identities outside the bounded dichotomies that shape the identities of Bengali women.

Can the white researcher engage in a cross cultural research?

My professional experience of working with this group of learners differs markedly from my research experience. As a white researcher I have continuously had to justify the reasons for engaging in research with participants of different backgrounds to my own since it has been argued that identities between researcher and the interviewer should

be matched where possible (Essed, 1990). Whilst Archer (2002) argues that certain degree of ‘matching’ between researchers and participants may offer a position from which to construct some shared form of identification, this does not necessarily minimise unequitable power relations between researchers and participants. Instead Archer (2003) argues more attention should be given to analysing the complex ways in which identities of class, ‘race’ and gender between participants and researchers interact in an ‘unpredictable’ way. Hence, here I stand against an ‘identity politics’ approach to the study of racialised femininities within the post compulsory education since any possibilities of matching the endlessly multiple and intersecting identities of researchers and participants is impossible. Moreover, even if the match was sought on one set of characteristics such as gender /and /or age and/ or ‘race’, some characteristics would be deemed as a greater signifier of commonality or difference over others (Francis & Archer, 2005).

Engaging in a process of critical exploration of commonalities and differences between my participants and me, the research has focused also on how, as a white researcher, I am constituted as a subject of my own knowledge. When participants talked about their accounts of racism, discrimination and cultural practices I felt that my position has shifted from that of *ghair*, ‘stranger’ to that of *apna*, a non-threatening, friendly outsider (Brah, 1999). Instead of being homogenised as a white researcher/ teacher, who had little in common with participants, I was able to build on commonalities with my participants to form a relationship that would transcend common barriers of race, class, education, age, language. I had more commonalities with participants than I expected at the start of this research: we bonded over the migrant experiences of settling into a

new country, learning English as a second language as well as coming to terms with the new class positioning. For example, when my participants asked me about my experiences of learning English as a second language or my interests in researching Bengali women, the nature of discussions turned into more informal conversations which relaxed participants and made them refer to me as equal on an interpersonal level.

This is what Spivak (1990: 30) refers to as ‘unlearning privilege’ whereby ‘not only does one become able to listen to that other constituency, but one learns to speak in such a way that it will be taken seriously by that other constituency’. Refusing to be boxed into one subjective identity, I am aware that my research may encounter the criticism that as a member of the dominant (White, middle class European) race it simply reproduces the dominant power relations structuring research on Bangladeshi women in further education sector. Whilst the research conducted with an Asian interviewer may have elicited different data, it would have not necessarily produced ‘better’ or more ‘correct’ data (Phoenix, 1994). Instead, the insistence on racial matching between the researcher and participants in the research process would have essentialised differences and led to a further ghettoisation of research. Distancing away from crude dichotomies constructed round notions of difference and similarities my research aims to contribute to a multiplicity of voices in research so that through critical exploration of other cultures the researcher can explore his/her own culture.

Limitations of the research

The purpose of this study has been to produce an account of a group of ESOL learners' constructions of South Asian femininities that unsettles, problematizes, reproduces and resists the various dominant, gendered, racist discourses which position Bengali women as 'Other'. Whilst the focus of this work has been on individual Bengali women's ESOL experience, I have also attempted to contextualise these accounts within broader social inequalities. Having undertaken a research within a specific socio-economic context, (Tower Hamlets 2011-2012) I have explored the positioning of Bengali female learners against the backdrop of intense ESOL policy reforms that have served to further marginalise and 'other' this group of learners (BIS, 2010a, 2010b 2011). As argued in Chapter 1 of literature review ESOL Bengali female learners have been discursively constructed in policy terms as 'inactive'. In claiming and privileging certain discourses and downplaying others that marginalise this group of learners my aim has been to look at variations between, and within, accounts, problematise the notion of one 'truth' or one unitary subject.

Here I want to be explicit about limitations of this research through recognition of the implications of the discursive positioning of all participants, including myself as a researcher. As I have argued in the earlier section of this final chapter that the cross cultural research conducted by a white, working class researcher remains problematic and reflective of wider social inequalities as through all stages of research (from establishing research questions to writing up this thesis) I, as a researcher, have remained in control. Despite claiming a specific ontological, epistemological and methodological feminist positioning in this research, I feel that Bengali female participants who

participated in this study had a limited input into the way in which they have been represented and written into the study. It would have been desirable for participants to have had chance to read the way in which their accounts have been interpreted and even discuss further more pertinent questions and topics. It would also have been insightful for all participants to have been interviewed more than once so the plural and fragmented nature of identities could be even further explored.

The project was limited by time and money and therefore it would have been rather time consuming to write up women's accounts in the language that is accessible to upper intermediate learners of English as a second language. Even though interview transcripts were offered to all learners at the end of interviews, very few participants took up the invitation to meet again. I attributed this not so much to lack of interest as the busy nature of women's lives where taking part in the research on Bengali women was taken up only if time allowed.

This leads me to another limitation of the research. As discussed in the methodology chapter, recruiting participants for the study was very time consuming and despite initial willingness on the part of participants it took me several months to establish my presence at a given site and establish a programme of interviewing. Retrospectively, I feel I should have allowed myself more time to do the fieldwork and started it at the beginning of the academic year, thus being able to finalise interviews before the busy academic periods such as the end of the term or the exam periods. Therefore, any further research would greatly benefit from the meticulous planning to accommodate the peaks of term time and the busy lives of women studying ESOL courses.

However, the reason fieldwork extended beyond the anticipated schedule was because the original focus of the study was too broad. It shifted from the effectiveness of ESOL provision in meeting heterogeneous needs of Bengali female learner to a more sociological concern with theorizing issues of identity constructions. As a result, I had to revise my interview schedule to identities shifting through time and place. This meant that once the interview schedule was revised I resumed my field work, which meant that the field work carried on beyond the expected deadline. Whilst these are not only limitations of the research, I do believe that as points they should be addressed in any other subsequent research.

Future research

The questions regarding my role as a white other, middle-class researcher could be further explored. As a researcher I felt I had a particular influence upon discourses being produced within life stories. When talking about custom specific topics, such as arranged marriages, women deconstructed the single practice of arranged marriages, highlighting a number of different positions women might take in arranging their marriages. My whiteness in interviews with Bengali learners was not constructed in unitary way: women raised the topic of arranged marriages and felt that as a white researcher I may homogenise this practice as oppressive. As Archer (2003) has explored it in her study of the constant discursive re-working and production of gendered identities between researchers and participants, it would have been interesting to explore to what extent responses would have differed had the same life history interviews been conducted by an Asian interviewer: therefore, to further

acknowledge ‘the difference your difference makes’ (Reay, 1996;443) is a crucial concern in this type of research.

Whilst I hope that this research has highlighted the extent to which external agencies and staff reproduced stereotypes of South Asian women’s passivity, in terms of future research I would suggest that more work could be conducted to show how Bengali women’s’ identity constructions are interlinked with wider social structures and power relations, of which further education colleges and training providers offer microscopic reflection of wider power inequalities that subordinate and homogenise black groups. Whilst some Bengali women in this study are agentic individuals who forge new subjective positions within the public and private sphere, I propose that more academic research should be carried out to bring about change to the way in which Bengali women are positioned by wider dominant discourses.

My own research provides a further example of agentic practices that Bengali women employ to assert, negotiate and transform gendered identities within the post-compulsory education and employment. It would be interesting to consider longitudinal study of this cohort of Bengali female learners to investigate the extent to which the expectations of achieving professional careers can be met: therefore, the possibilities for the further research in this field remain potent.

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Appendix 1: Interview schedules with the staff

The themes to be included in interviews with staff:

The purpose of the interview is to find out about your views on the current delivery of ESOL, the constraints placed on the provision by the recent changes in funding and the way in which these factors have shaped Bengali female learners' experiences of learning English within your institutions.

The interviews will be very informal and will cover issues including: your previous experiences of education;

This interview is confidential (private) and anonymous (your real name will not be used). You can stop the interview at any time. If you want to carry on with the interview, please sign the form to give your permission (consent) to being interviewed.

The interview will be taped and if you wish you can have a copy of the interview.

1. Your role here and experience of teaching ESOL

- Tell me bit a bit about yourself and how you came to teach ESOL and work here (prompts): what is your experience of teaching generally and of teaching ESOL/ (i.e. what kind of provision have you worked for in the past?)
- In what way does your previous experience of teaching ESOL compare to the current one: (more /less teaching resources, greater/ less focus on meeting the needs of learners; more/less target focused; the nature of targets: employment/ qualifications focus; more/less teacher autonomy in the classroom and etc.)

2. Suitability of provision for meeting the needs of female Bengali learners:

- Tell me bit more about the purpose of ESOL training learners receive here: is it geared towards learners gaining employment or externally recognised qualifications? or is the purpose dual?; to what extent is the purpose linked to funding?
- How suitable do you feel the course is in meeting students' expectations and aspirations for future; (Prompts: does it prepare them for higher level of ESOL or other vocational courses; better chances of gaining sustainable employment in their field (if learners are of professional background)

3. The impact of current changes to funding on Bengali female learners' experiences of studying ESOL

Tell me about the changes you have noticed to the nature of provisions since latest changes to funding:

- What constraints are imposed upon the provision by funding requirements? (i.e. less/more GLH (guided learning hours), bigger classes, less funding for additional learning support outside the class environment, renaming/relabelling the ESOL provision as literacy to secure its funding, making the provision more work-focused to satisfy the external funding, a greater push towards meeting targets i.e. qualification or jobs/placements for students)
- impact of recent changes to funding on delivery of courses
- What external/ internal factors are affecting Bengali female learners' achievements? (external such as meeting the JCP's targets, family pressure/lack of support v internal such as lack of motivation to succeed)

4. Learning /teaching methods for meeting the needs of Bengali female learners

I'd like to hear your views about the progress Bengali female learners make in your classroom:

- How does their progress compare to learners from other backgrounds? Do you notice any major differences? (Or male Bengali learners)
- How well do you think the Bengali learners in this setting are progressing at present?
- What are your views/ opinions on why Bengali learners are achieving /underachieving in the particular learning context? (if they are underachieving what teaching / learning methods could compensate for this i.e. would they benefit from more additional learning support or female only classes; do they feel self-conscious volunteering to answer questions and need to be prompted more often than other learners and etc.)
- Can diversity of female Bengali learners' needs of different educational and employment background ever be met in the same classroom? (i.e. does one size fit all?) (can teacher ever meet the needs of all learners in the classroom and ensure that they all progress at their own pace through the use of differentiation methods)
- Do you believe that differentiation (of teaching and learning methods) as a teaching and learning method is effective or it disadvantages/ advantages / teacher/ learner more? (places greater strain on teacher to produce materials at different levels

of study and learners feel branded as underachievers/ achiever in the classroom though the use of differentiated materials

5. External factors affecting Bengali female learners' levels of participation /achievement

- Tell me if you have encountered any instances where female learners of Bengali background were unable or unwilling to take part in provision?
- What were the reasons for this, if you know: (family resistance / lack of crèche facilities at the college/ inability to access suitable childcare provision.)
- How did you address this?

6. Suitability of provision in meeting the needs of female ESOL learners

Tell me about the nature of provision and additional facilities which enable female Bengali learners to make the best use of provision

- Do you think that the provision could be improved to increase participation/ achievement levels of Bengali female learners?
In your opinion how can the provision be changed?:
(prompts: Should/ are the additional facilities included in the provision:
 - crèche facilities
 - support with childcare costs
 - legal clinic advice centre
 - counselling support
 - what else?

Is there anything else you would like to add to this interview?

Thank you

Appendix 2: Interview schedules with Bengali female participants
The themes to be included in the interviews with Bengali female learners in both learning environments:

The purpose of the interview is to find out about your experience of learning English.

The interviews will be very informal and will cover issues including: your previous experiences of education; how you came to be on this course, your feelings about this course (what you enjoy or don't enjoy); what you hope to gain from the course, your hopes for the future.

This interview is confidential (private) and anonymous (your real name will not be used). You can stop the interview at any time. If you want to carry on with the interview please sign the form to give your permission (consent) to being interviewed.

The interview will be taped.

The interviews will take about an hour.

1. About you:

- Tell me about yourself:
(how long have you lived in England?; why did you come to live here?; who do you live with?; where do you live?)

2. Your previous levels of education (general) in your country:

- Tell me about your previous level of education:
(did you enjoy school when you were younger?; what subjects did you study? what were your favourite subjects?)
- What is your highest level of education?: Primary, secondary, college or university:
(again, what subjects did you study at higher level (if applicable); how old were you when you finished school /college in your country?; how did you feel about finishing your education? Proud? relieved? Wanting to return?)

3. Your previous employment in your country:

- tell me about your work experience in this country or your country of origin:
(did you work in your country of origin?; if yes was it paid/ unpaid: housewife, carer for an elder relative; did you enjoy it?)

4. Your experiences of learning English in your country of origin:

I would like to find out more about your experience of learning English in this country and what you enjoy learning about in your English class.

- What do you hope to get out of doing this class?: (Prompts: help you children with their homework, find a job, do the job you had in your country, to be able to continue with your education or do more classes in English or other courses.)
- Did you learn English before in your country? (i.e. where did you learn it? : primary, secondary school, college or private tuition)
- When did you start learning it? (Prompts: how old were you when you started learning it?; how long did the course last?; what level did you achieve?)
- Was it compulsory or optional (part of the curriculum or not? /was it free? -if it cost how much?) Did you enjoy it? was it good or bad experience of learning English: what would you change about it?-less/ more grammar, games, speaking and listening activities; , what did you like about it (prompt: teacher , environment, methods etc. etc. etc.)

5. Your experiences of learning English in other learning contexts:(or previous experience of learning English in the UK/Europe)

I **now** want to ask you about your experience of learning English in this country.

- Before starting this course, did you learn English in another way/ place? (i.e. Where did you learn it?(training provider, adult education centre, further education college, community centre, your child's school or private tuition) or from family/ friends – more informally)
- How long did you study it for?
- Did you get any qualifications/certificates out of it?(if yes what qualifications –in ESOL or literacy?; what was the awarding body for qualifications–Trinity ESOL, Cambridge ESOL, City and Guilds, Edexcel or ESB (English Speaking Board),; at what level did you get qualification –entry level or above)
- What did you get out of this experience of learning English? (Prompts: better knowledge of English, more friends, ability to progress to the next level of English, ability to help your children with their homework, communicate better in English with you children's teachers, qualifications or better employment opportunities, greater confidence in your learning

abilities, study skills, place at the college to study the course of your choice, etc,etc.)

6. Your experiences of and reasons for studying English now:

Tell me how you came to be on this course:

- How did you hear about it? (did you hear about it from your family, friends or external organisation such as JCP)
- When did you start your course: (prompts: how long did you study it for?; how many hours per week did you study it at home?)
- Why do you attend? (because you want to or because you need to?: (to keep the JCP benefits you need to attend mandatory (compulsory) work based ESOL programmes)
- Why have you decided to attend this particular course? (Prompts: is it because it is close to home?; is it because somebody has recommended it to you?; is it because you already know somebody who is doing the course?; is it because the JCP has sent you on the course?)
- What do you want to get out of the course? (i.e. study English at higher level, do another vocational or academic course, get a job or voluntary placement, continue your professional career, help children with their homework, attend parents' evenings, talk to your neighbours in English, feel more integrated in the community life, become more independent from family)
- What do your family/friends/ children think about your attendance here? Do they support you? Do they/ have they studied English here too?
- How do you feel about doing it? Do you like it or not and why? (prompts: the course is too long/short/; you feel it is too easy/difficult for you; it is not at the right time for you; there are no crèche facilities and etc.:)
- Are you getting out of the course what you want to get?
- In what way do you feel you have made progress in your spoken /written English?: (i.e. greater confidence in speaking to other people in English, helping your children with their homework, talking to your children's parents at school, attending school evening and etc.,)
- What do your friends/ family comment on your level of English? (i.e. have they commented on your English since you started the course?)
- What activities help you improve your English? (speaking and listening, grammar games and exercise, writing formal and informal letters, emails, memos or others...). What activities would you like to do less/more of?
- Would you like to do another ESOL course at the centre/ college at higher level?

- How can this course be made better? Would any of the facilities below improve the provision:
 - crèche facilities
 - support with childcare costs
 - legal clinic advice centre
 - counselling support

7. Your hopes / aspirations for future:

- What do you hope to achieve when you finish the course: (study English at higher level, do another vocational or academic course, get a job or voluntary placement, continue your professional career, help children with their homework, attend parents 'evening, talk to your neighbours in English, feel more integrated in the community life, become more independent from family)
- Do you think this course will / is helping you achieve these future plans? (Prompts: in what way the course should be changed/ improved to help you achieve your future hopes? (i.e. less/ more contract hours, less /more homework, less/ more help from the tutor, less/ more IT based activities, less/more group/pair activities, more additional learning support outside the classroom))

Is there anything else you would like to add to this interview?

Thank you

Appendix 3: Follow up interview schedules with Bengali female participants _

Update from last interview (original sample only)

Refer to summary from last interview:

- Changes in their circumstances (regarding marriage, children, education, employment, and immigration status) since the first interview.
- Who lives in household now? (husband, children, parents, parents-in-law, other relatives).
- What have you gained from this course? (Prompts: improved self-confidence, improved physical or mental well-being, more confidence in your learning, ability to participate in/contribute to the group, grown as a person, made friends, improved work prospects or promotion, new skills and knowledge, ability to progress to the next step, function effectively within a community space, ability to help your children with their homework; improved/extended social relationships, other please explain)

Background information (new sample only)

1. **Tell me about yourself:** (Prompts: what part of Bangladesh does your family come from originally? how long have you lived in England?; why did you come to live here?; who do you live with?; what language do you speak? –what language are spoken at home by you, your children and the rest of the family? ; what age are you?; what is your current immigration status?; what area of city do you live in; is the house rented?, who owns it if owned?)

Timeline: participants are given a timeline and a set of stickers. They post set of stickers on the timeline to show important event in their lives, such as arrival to the UK. Participants are given additional blank stickers, and encouraged to comment on events that were important to them:

- Discuss with them what happened and why, in what order, exactly how old they were.
- Reflecting back on the past events participants will be asked about their own expectations, their families' expectations: (why did you have these expectations?; what influenced your expectations – friends, family, other influences?.; what did you expect/ not expect to happen and why?)

2. Your previous levels of education (general) in your country:

Timeline: Participants mark on timeline their experiences of education in Bangladesh_

- Tell me about your previous level of education: (what were your experiences of education in Bangladesh: good, very good or bad?: what subjects did you study? what were your favourite subjects?)
- What is your highest level of education?: Primary, secondary, college or university:
(again, what subjects did you study at higher level (if applicable); how old were you when you finished school /college in your country?; how did you feel about finishing your education? Proud? relieved? Wanting to return?)

3. Your previous employment in your country:

- Tell me about your work experience in this country or your country of origin: (did you work in your country of origin?;if yes details of any jobs doing now :type, hours worked, wages, how long for; did you enjoy it?
- If employed/been employed before, what influenced your decision to get a job?
Has the job lived up to your expectations; why did you take up this job?
- What are the barriers to getting a job?
- What are your expectations? What jobs would you like to do in this country or your country?
- What qualifications would you need to get into these jobs?
- Do/did you have female family members who have jobs? (details)
- Does/did this influence your own desire to work?
- Are you studying English to improve your employment opportunities?
- Details of jobs of other household members, namely their husbands

4. Your experiences of learning English in your country of origin:

I would like to find out more about your experience of learning English in this country and what you enjoy learning about in your English class.

- What do you hope to get out of doing this class?: (Prompts: help you children with their homework, find a job, do the job you had in your country, to be able to continue with your education or do more classes in English or other courses.)

- Did you learn English before in your country? (i.e. where did you learn it? : primary, secondary school, college or private tuition)
- When did you start learning it? (Prompts: how old were you when you started learning it?; how long did the course last?; what level did you achieve? was this experience of learning what you expected it to be?)
- Was it compulsory or optional (part of the curriculum or not? /was it free?-if it cost how much?) Did you enjoy it? was it good or bad experience of learning English: what would you change about it?-less/ more grammar, games, speaking and listening activities; , what did you like about it (prompt: teacher , environment, methods etc. etc. etc.)

5. Your experiences of learning English in other learning contexts:(or previous experience of learning English in the UK/Europe)

I **now** want to ask you about your experience of learning English in this country.

- Before starting this course, did you learn English in another way/ place? (i.e. Where did you learn it? (training provider, adult education centre, further education college, community centre, your child's school or private tuition) or from family/ friends – more informally)
- How long did you study it for?
- What did you gain out of this experience? (Prompts: improved self-confidence, improved physical or mental well-being, more confidence in your learning, ability to participate in/contribute to the group, grown as a person, made friends, improved work prospects or promotion, new skills and knowledge, ability to progress to the next step, function effectively within a community space, improved/extended social relationships, other please explain)

6. Your experiences of and reasons for studying English now:

Tell me how you came to be on this course:

- How did you hear about it? (did you hear about it from your family, friends or external organisation such as JCP)
- When did you start your course: (prompts: how long did you study it for?; how many hours per week did you study it at home?)
- Why do you attend? (because you want to or because you need to?: (to keep the JCP benefits you need to attend mandatory (compulsory) work based ESOL programmes)
- Why have you decided to attend this particular course? (Prompts: is it because it is close to home?; is it because

somebody has recommended it to you?; is it because you already know somebody who is doing the course?; is it because the JCP has sent you on the course?)

- What do you want to get out of the course? (i.e. study English at higher level, do another vocational or academic course, get a job or voluntary placement, continue your professional career, help children with their homework, attend parents' evenings, talk to your neighbours in English, feel more integrated in the community life, become more independent from family, gain more confidence, other please comment)
- In what way can course be improved/ adapted to better meet your needs in terms of employment, education or other?
- What do your family/friends/ children think about your attendance here? Do they support you? Do they/ have they studied English here too? Do they help you with childcare?
- How do you feel about doing it? Do you like it or not and why? (prompts: the course is too long/short/; you feel it is too easy/difficult for you; it is not at the right time for you; there are no crèche facilities and etc. :)
- How does your experience of learning English in this country compare to that of in Bangladesh? In what way is it better/ worse than experience in Bangladesh?
- In what way do you feel you have made progress in your spoken /written English? (i.e. greater confidence in speaking to other people in English, helping your children with their homework, talking to your children's parents at school, attending school evening and etc.,)
- What do your friends/ family comment on your level of English?(i.e. have they commented on your English since you started the course?)
- What activities do you enjoy doing most in the class? (i.e. speaking and listening activities, grammar games and exercise, writing formal and informal letters, emails, memos or others...). What activities would you like to do less/more of?
- What methods of learning do you feel are most useful? (pair work, group work, individual project, questions and answers, presentations)
- Would you like to do another ESOL course at the centre/ college at higher level?

7. Your hopes / aspirations for future:

- I would like to know what your hopes/ aspirations for future are:
- What do you hope to achieve when you finish the course: (study English at higher level, do another vocational or academic course, get a job or voluntary placement, continue your professional career, help children with their homework,

attend parents 'evening, talk to your neighbours in English, feel more integrated in the community life, become more independent from family)

- To what extent has your English course helped you gain more confidence in your learning? (What courses, if any did/do they want to do?)
- To what extent has your English course helped you
 - : gain more confidence in your learning? (What courses, if any did/do they want to do?)
 - : support your children with their schooling
 - : interact more effectively in the community
 - : gain independence from your family
 - : approach job search with a greater sense of confidence
 - : move into paid employment/ voluntary work/
- To what extent can the course be improved to help you with any of the above?
- What are your aspirations for your (female) children? Same or different to the role they personally have taken?
- **Is there anything else you would like to add to this interview?**
- Thank you

Appendix 4: Life history interview prompts

Activity labels

First arrive in UK	Time in Bangladesh	Leave school	Start college	Return college
Go to university	Leave university	Get married	First born child	Another child born
Another child born	Divorced	Separated	Widowed	Married again
English course in Bangladesh	English course in UK	Get job	Start voluntary work	Own first home

Appendix 5: **timeline**

0-14 years	15-17 years	18-19 years	20-22 years

23-25 years	26-29 years	30-34 years	35- 39 years

40-49 years	50-59 years	60-69 years	

