

**Imagining an ideal husband: Marriage as a site of aspiration among pious
Somali women in London.**

Giulia Liberatore

University of Oxford

Abstract

This article is about “marriage talk” and the forms of imagination and aspiration that it entails. It draws on discussions and debates about ideal husbands among young Somali Muslim women in Britain who, in recent years, have begun practising Islam. Through these debates, these women draw on various different discourses, values, norms and ideals to re-think and re-imagine themselves in relation to multiple others, including kin, friends and God. Marriage, I argue, is a site of aspiration (Khan 2012), as it engages the ethical imagination—the means and modes by which individuals re-imagine relations to self and others (Moore 2011). By reflecting on, discussing and imagining a future spouse, these young women draw on different forms of knowledge in relation to enlarged visions of self and other. I demonstrate that analyses of the complexly constituted Muslim subject (Schielke 2010a, Deeb and Harb 2013) need to pay attention not only to the coexistence of multiple moral registers or rubrics, but also to how these connect to the ways in which individuals imagine new ways of being. The article brings to the fore the importance of intersubjectivity and shines light on the processes of imagining and aspiring, which are crucial for an understanding of the complex lives of young women who turn to practise Islam.

(Islam; gender; piety; subjectivity; aspiration; United Kingdom; Somali)

The *halal* marriage event

On a cold afternoon in December 2010 I sat with a small group of Somali women sipping tea in “Friends House”, near Euston station in central London. The venue, home to the Quakers, was also the site of the weekly Islamic classes that I attended with this group of women, which included Zaynab, Ifrah, and Layla, throughout my fieldwork in London.¹ However, that afternoon we had gathered early before the class, not to undertake additional study, nor to catch up on the week, but to discuss the Somali *halal* marriage event² that Zaynab was planning for the following month.

The idea for the event had come to her a few weeks previously, the catalyst for which was a growing frustration in finding suitable men for marriage. While there was a time when Zaynab had been a keen clubber, with multiple boyfriends, her pool of potential partners had shrunk since she had begun to practice Islam. She was now in her mid 30s and was beginning to worry that she was past the marriageable age. “These days it’s incredibly difficult to find a professional Somali man who is also practising like us” she explained. The event, therefore, was conceived as a means through which to unearth some appropriate men, and she had contacted like-minded pious friends (and her anthropologist friend) to help her with planning and organization.

The enthusiasm with which Zaynab had initially introduced the event, however, was quashed within minutes of the conversation. She quickly realized that achieving consensus was not going to be easy. Whereas she was keen to limit the event to *Somali* men, and in particular to *professional* men, her friend Layla was intent on attracting Muslims from a range of ethnicities, and was less worried about issues relating to professionalism, status or wealth. For Layla it did not make sense that an

event, which was to be first and foremost an Islamic halal event, should be open exclusively to *Somali* men. To add further to the tensions, Ifrah had kept quiet during the discussion and had shown little interest in being involved. When I turned to her towards the end of the discussion to gauge her opinion she replied, “I’m too romantic for this, it’s not for me!” For Ifrah, such a structured dating event was devoid of spontaneity, love, and romance.

Layla, Ifrah and Zaynab were part of a group of loosely-connected women who had begun—in their words—“practising” Islam in recent years. They had become acquainted with one another through their mutual interest in seeking Islamic reformist forms of knowledge in London.³ Like other young Muslims in Europe who are part of the global Islamic revival, these young women stressed their engagement with an “authentic”, universal Islam (Rozario 2011, Jacobson 1998). Despite this shared commitment, some young women had been practising for longer periods of time, whilst for others it was only a recent or temporary commitment. Furthermore, the women disagreed on what elements of “practice” ought to be prioritized, and the level of commitment, intensity, and form of engagement with Islamic sources varied across the group.

A shift towards practising often coincided with thinking seriously about marriage. For these young women—many of whom had dated in the past—this had radically transformed the strategies for seeking out a potential husband. Some had begun searching for husbands through Islamic avenues, stressing their preference for a halal pre-marital relationship where meetings were typically arranged in public venues or with a chaperone (Ahmad 2012:199-204). Others, however, struggled with these restrictions and preferred to spend time with a man without close supervision.

These women's ideas and aspirations for marriage were shaped in multiple ways and by a wide range of sources. Many had been raised in the UK and were avid consumers of romantic comedies, films, and novels. Since practising, however, they had additionally begun learning about Islamic notions of marriage, by attending Islamic events or courses run by a vast array of independent institutes which catered to young Muslims. The courses were often practical in nature, boasting titles such as *True Love, Getting Married: Clear and Practical Guidance for Success*. They provided information on everything from cultivating the correct virtues and dispositions within marital relations, to managing parental expectations, or adhering to permissible sexual acts within marriage. Furthermore, the women often spent their time skimming through the marriage sections of Islamic bookshops or searching for information, videos and podcasts available online through Islamic websites.

Marriage was not only a topic of study or entertainment but also one of intense conversation and debate. Discussions were frequent, and could be sparked by a remark about a romantic film which one of the women had seen, or a comment from an Islamic course they had attended. Anecdotes about their (often failed) attempts at finding a husband could be humorous, but the tone could often shift, and become serious, as they discussed their ideal husbands, the nature of the marital relation for which they longed, and the married life to which they aspired. Whilst these exchanges involved joking and teasing one another, they also involved a great deal of reflection, thought, and imagination. Our conversation that December afternoon, and the discussions and planning that ensued, were one such example.

This form of exchange, which I call "marriage talk", was crucial in forging and transforming these women's ideas about marriage. Through turning to practise Islam

and reflecting on generational differences these women were actively re-imagining their ideal marital relations, and also re-working their relations with multiple others. As I demonstrate in this article, marriage is an important site of aspiration through which these young women engage with different forms of knowledge, discourses, ideals, and values, in order to re-imagine relations to self and others (Moore 2011). I draw this notion of aspiration from Khan (2012) who focuses on aspiration as a process of openness, of becoming, rather than an actual state or end point—a tendency rather than a movement or project with identifiable trajectories. I place analytical emphasis on the processes of striving and setting new horizons rather than on the realization of particular projects or endpoints. Whereas for Khan, religious argumentation among Muslims in Pakistan may be an expression of on-going striving to become better Muslims, debates among young pious Somali women in Britain reveal efforts to manage several overlapping projects and forms of striving. These young women are not only seeking to become practising Muslims, but are also grappling with the questions of what it means to be Somali, British, young, female, and educated.

Through “marriage talk” these young women debate and experiment with different forms of knowledge⁴ and various “moral registers” (Schielke 2010a), some of which are newly encountered, others not. These are employed to imagine novel relations to self and other (Moore 2011), and marriage, therefore, is also a privileged site from which to observe processes of change. I demonstrate how a focus on marriage debates as a site of aspiration enables us to connect these women’s intimate imagined relations with self and other with their engagements with pious ideals and discourses, and with other values, desires, and norms. I thus bring to the fore the importance of intersubjectivity, and the processes of fantasy and the imagination, for our

understandings of these young women's practice of Islam, and the work on piety and Muslim subjectivities more broadly (Mahmood 2005, Schielke 2010a, Deeb 2006, Deeb and Harb 2013).

As the final unfolding of the event highlights, the organizers were less concerned with the outcome, and more with the process of managing and planning; the event was a space created *by* and *for* them to articulate, discuss, debate and imagine their future. In fact, although the marriage event did go ahead thanks to Zaynab's hard work and her successful recruitment of several other organizers, it was ultimately unsuccessful in attracting any suitable men. In the weeks preceding the event, the organizers had registered twenty-five men, but on the day seven showed up, and only a handful arrived on time. Even those who did attend were quickly dismissed by the women who saw them either as too "traditional", or not sufficiently pious; others were not earning enough money, and several, as one young woman put it, "just weren't attractive!" Nevertheless, as I show below, the women continued to discuss and debate the issue and—despite the failure of the event—did not abandon the idea of organizing something similar in the future.

In what follows I first explain how a focus on marriage as a site of aspiration contributes to a more complex understanding of the pious Muslim subject. The next section introduces Zaynab and Layla, exploring the changes between older generations and young pious women. The ethnographic focus of the article is on two discussions around an "ideal husband". The first expands on the marriage event and the ideal of a professional, practising Somali man, while the second explores Ifrah's fantasy of love "Jane Austen style". Analytically, these two examples demonstrate how imagined relations with potential husbands entail drawing forms of knowledge,

which are used to re-work these young women's relations with self and others in various ways.

Complex Muslim subjectivities

Over the last decade Mahmood's (2005) work on the women's piety movement in Cairo has served as a key reference point for anthropological discussions on Islam, piety, and subjectivity. Her contribution lies not only in unraveling the conceptions of the self, moral agency, and politics that underpin the practices of the piety movement, but also in rethinking the assumptions at the heart of secular-liberalism.

Mahmood draws extensively on Foucauldian ethics in order to theorize why her female interlocutors willingly submit to Islamic virtues. In his later work, Foucault (1985; 1990) develops the Aristotelian concept of positive ethics, which interprets ethics as practical activities that further a particular way of life. For Foucault, studying ethics is not about observing how a subject conforms to or reflects on rules, but entails an exploration of how human beings shape themselves into ethical subjects. Developing this notion, Mahmood shows how members of the piety movement draw on the "Islamic discursive tradition" (Asad 1986) to constitute themselves through a particular "mode of subjectification"—in this case submission to divine law—and through certain "techniques of the self", such as praying and donning the hijab, which entail reconfiguring the relations between different dimensions of the self (emotions, external practices, intentions, and so on). These practices, therefore, are not a form of passive indoctrination, but are performed to accomplish a particular *telos* as the perfect model of piety based on the exemplary behavior of the Prophet and a submission to God (Mahmood 2005:28-29).⁵

Mahmood's insight into ethical processes of self-fashioning is helpful here to understand how young Somali women turn to practise Islam by engaging with reformist forms of knowledge in order to *willingly* shape themselves as pious subjects. However, it provides limited scope for understanding the broader context within which these practices are situated, and the multiple and coexisting discourses, practices, values, and ideals that shape their lives.

In contrast to this work, more recent analyses have turned away from an emphasis on discourse, to focus on the complexity of the everyday lives of young Muslims (Schielke 2010a, Marsden 2007, Osella and Soares 2010, Schielke and Debevec 2012, Deeb and Harb 2013). This work has distanced itself from Mahmood's concern with doctrinal debate and argumentation which, these scholars argue, portrays piety as a unilinear and coherent process sealed off from its context, and from other ideals and aspirations. Scholarship on Europe, for example, has pointed to how pious practices are negotiated in a heterogeneous and majority secular public sphere (Jouili 2009), but also how pious projects of self-discipline are entangled with secular or liberal ethics (Fernando 2010, Fadil 2009, Jacobsen 2010).

Schielke's (2010a, 2010b) work, for example, has been influential in shifting focus to the complexities of everyday forms of religiosity. He describes the ambivalent, and at times immoral, views and experiences of young men in a northern Egyptian village. Subjectivity, Schielke argues, must account for ambiguities; whilst people may present their trajectory as coherent, they constantly shift between multiple, contradictory self-representations, torn between conflicting self-ideals. Romantic love, social respect, good character and self-realization constitute other ethical "teleologies of the subject", or "moral registers" which provide moral and normative frameworks

for his interlocutors (*ibid* 2010a:29-30). However, different conceptions of the self are present within a single culture, but also within the life of a single individual.

Building on this, Deeb and Harb's (2013) work on café culture in a southern neighborhood of Beirut reveals how young pious Muslims live complex lives which involve interpreting situations for themselves and bringing together "moral rubrics",⁶ with a high degree of flexibility. While Schielke's work assumes a fixed and stable understanding of religion as a set of commandments and prohibitions that are non-negotiable, their analysis points to the "flexibility" of moral norms. Contestation and ambiguity occur not only between different moral rubrics, but also within sets of rules and norms that constitute each rubric.

This body of work provides a means through which we can unravel the complexities of my interlocutors' subject positions as Somali, practising Muslims, and educated women in post 9/11 Britain. Like young men in Cairo and youth in south Beirut, these women are not solely concerned with piety, but also with managing a range of different "moral registers", such as obligations towards kin, and aspirations for social mobility or romantic love. Although they all aspire to, and prioritize, their "practice" of Islam, they negotiate pious ideals with a set of obligations, desires, and ideals which are part of their heterogeneous social contexts, and also approach rules and norms with a great degree of flexibility (Deeb and Harb 2013). However, this scholarship on complex Muslim subjectivities has prioritized how "moral registers" are negotiated and contested, but has left unexplored how these are personalized and given meaning. It has paid less attention, I suggest, to how these young people shape themselves into ethical subjects by drawing on different discourses, values, ideals,

and norms—the processes by which “moral registers” relate to their understandings of self and other.

Marriage, I argue, offers an important site to explore these processes for three main reasons. First, it brings multiple relations with self and other in conflict with one another, and thus sheds light on the intersubjective dynamics of self-fashioning. Marriage is as much about the self as it is about relations with kin, God, and multiple others. Second, these relations are mediated through different sets of values, ideals, and discourses, and hence marriage reveals the tensions between different “moral registers”. Finally, “marriage talk” in particular is an imaginative process entailing experimentation and the setting of new horizons (Khan 2012), and therefore provides a means to explore processes of change. Marriage engages with the “ethical imagination”, the means through which individuals *imagine* novel relationships to themselves and to others (Moore 2011:15).

Moore’s concept of the ethical imagination builds on Foucault’s notion of ethics although her interest, like mine, is not in engaging with the anthropology of ethics *per se* (Laidlaw 2014, Lambek 2010, Faubion 2001). Whilst for Foucault (2000: 117) ethical practice is informed by thought and reflection—an ability to stand back from acting and reacting—the ethical imagination also includes embodied dispositions, affect, and, crucially, fantasy and the imagination (Moore 2011). Therefore, as Moore elaborates, the relation between self and other is historically specific, social, embodied and affective, as well as imagined and based on forms of knowing and unknowing (Moore 2011:76). Moore’s concept builds on Foucault’s work but also on a Lacanian understanding of the subject, which foregrounds fantasy and the

imagination as "an ability, capacity, orientation in the world" which can produce images, representations and fantasies (Moore 2007:15).

Furthermore, for Moore the self is part of a "dynamic relational matrix" (Long and Moore 2013b). Relations are interdependent and co-constitutive; they are formative of the subject, but also something upon which the subject can reflect and subsequently transform (Long and Moore 2013b:4). In addition, these fantasized relations to self and others can have different spatial scales (Moore 2011:78). Whereas some relations may be premised on "detailed empirical knowledge of shared intimacies and spaces ... others are mediated by more distant institutions, structures and imaginaries" (*ibid* 2011:78). Therefore, fantasized relations to husbands may be mediated by everyday experiences as well as by global discourses on love, piety or narratives of financial success. Self-other relations may refer to both intimate relations in the home, village or city, as well as to distant individuals or entities, such as God.

Marriage provides a space for these young women to re-imagine relations with potential spouses. As these new fantasies are articulated, these women's "relational matrix" shifts so that they also reconfigure their relations to kin, friends, an imagined notion of the British public, and God. This process is made possible through discussion and self-reflection, but also, importantly, through the imagination. As these young women engage with new forms of knowledge, such as Islamic discourses and teachings, and bring these in relation to other moral projects and ideals, they also transform their understandings of self-other relations. Marriage, therefore, is a site from which to observe changing engagements with the ethical imagination as it provides a space for these young women to articulate, contest and imagine new possibilities for the future. These insights are important, I argue, because they enable

us to understand the “specific grounds for transformations in subjectivities” (Moore 2011: 74), but also because they shed light on the processes of reflection and imagination that motivate these women’s engagements with Islamic forms of knowledge in London.

Practising Islam in London

The following analysis is based on 16 months of ethnographic fieldwork that I conducted amongst 21 Somali households across London. Within these households I spoke in English and my focus was primarily on young women raised in the UK, and their mothers, the majority of whom were practising Islam. My approach involved following individual women’s trajectories across—and occasionally beyond—London. This enabled me to delve into the everyday fabric of these women’s lives and to gain a textured understanding of both generations’ ideas of ethical self-fashioning in relation to kin, friends, or non-Muslims, and in a range of different contexts.

I met Zaynab, Ifrah, Layla, and their group of loosely connected women early on in my fieldwork, and by the time the dating event took place I was seeing them frequently—both individually and as a group—as well as attending regular Islamic classes with them, as I mentioned above. I was included in the event partly because of my presence at the initial discussion, but also because I was a useful addition to their team. In the weeks leading up to the event I was handed an old mobile phone containing a new number, and assigned the task of answering phone calls from potential participants. In this way they would not be recognized should a relative or friend call to enquire about the event. Zaynab also asked me to help set up the hall on the day and to sit at the registration desk at the entrance in order to welcome the guests as they arrived. We had become close friends at that point and I had come to

know her family and friends well.

Zaynab, like her other practising friends, is the daughter of refugee parents who migrated to the UK in the last few decades as a consequence of civil strife across the Somali-speaking territories. She arrived as a teenager and settled with her mother and siblings in East London in the mid 1990s. Originally from what is now Somaliland, the former British Protectorate, she had also lived in Ethiopia for some time, and had learnt to speak English fluently. She completed her degree in London and soon embarked on a number of entrepreneurial projects. One of Zaynab's less lucrative projects involved supporting a group of friends in setting up a glossy lifestyle magazine aimed at young Somalis in the diaspora. The idea for the magazine came after the July 2005 bombings, she explained, and in reaction to the negative portrayal of Somali youth in the media: "We decided to do something positive. So we put together something different, with a professional 'modern' outlook on Somali youth." She also began working as a consultant, and soon moved out of the council flat she shared with her family in a working class area of East London, to live in an upper class neighborhood in West London. She explained, "I used to think all I wanted was a good job, loads of money, a car, and beautiful clothes!"

This life outlook changed on one of her shopping trips with a friend. She was walking around the designer section of a large department store when she suddenly felt dizzy and collapsed. When Zaynab became conscious again she realized that an ambulance had been called, but it was not there to rescue her. Rather bizarrely, another woman had also collapsed in the shop at the same time, and was in a far more critical condition. "I thought I was going to die..." she explained, "But I was saved, I'd been given a second chance." Although she never explained the reasons for her collapse,

Zaynab interpreted the incident as a near-death and life-changing experience, forcing her to reflect on her self, and move back to live alone with her mother in East London, and in close proximity of some of her siblings. Soon after, she began praying and donning the hijab. “I had to give up my friends, my life... I changed completely... I used to think success was working hard, making money, but it’s different now. I don’t regret a thing and I don’t miss it at all!”

Like other first-generation Somali women (McGown 1999), Zaynab’s mother had become more religious since moving to the UK and had begun reading the *Qur’an* in Somali on a regular basis, and donning the *jilbaab*.⁷ When Zaynab returned home her mother welcomed her with open arms, delighted that she had at long last embarked on the religious path. Together they started attending Quran classes in Somali at a local mosque. However, Zaynab soon began to make new practising friends through classes that were run in English and aimed at young multi-ethnic Muslims, thus distancing herself from her mother’s approach to Islam. The differences between her engagement with knowledge and that of her mother were captured by the following comment: “My mum is very disciplined, she goes to talks at 8:30am, fasts every Thursday. But we’re also very different. My mum works from the outside-in. She’s more about doing things, praying, hijab, actions, and all about the *haram* and *halal*...” For Zaynab, her mother had learnt to correct her practice of Islam, but had not worked on her spiritual and emotional connection with God, and was not concerned with understanding the reasons behind certain practices, which instead were crucial to Zaynab and her practicing friends. This emphasis on exteriority, on rules and regulations, was seen to lack the reflexivity, choice and reasoned engagement necessary for a “proper” engagement with Islam. As I elaborate below, this uncritical adoption of rules and norms was also often described as “cultural.”

Although Zaynab continued to pursue her interest in business, her involvement with the lifestyle magazine became increasingly problematic, given that most of its coverage focused on young Somalis frequenting gender-mixed parties, dressed in what she would now consider to be immodest clothing. There were also many aspects of her life that she preferred not to share with her mother; the halal marriage event, for example, was kept secret for fear that her mother would consider it insufficiently pious or inappropriate according to Somali norms.

Layla lived near Zaynab's house in East London, with her parents and four siblings. Also originally from present day Somaliland, her family had settled as refugees in the UK in the early 1990s when Layla was only a small child. Having attended a local secondary school of predominantly Bengali Muslim students, she went to university outside London with a largely non-Muslim student body. She often found herself having to "defend Islam and explain about Islam... especially against Islamophobic comments." She was frequently reminded of her heightened visibility as a Muslim: "They see the hijab before they see there's a person there!" she once exclaimed.

It was then that she started, in her words, "seeking knowledge"—reading Islamic texts, listening to online talks, and attending classes, lectures and events organized across the city. Many of the sessions she attended were organized by independent institutes in rented out spaces across London, and managed and led predominantly by young second-generation Muslims.⁸ It was during one of these sessions that Layla met Zaynab and Ifrah. These young women were brought together by their mutual interest in seeking knowledge, but were also at similar stages in their life courses, and shared experiences of generational differences.

Arguments between Layla and her parents were also common; like Zaynab, Layla frequently criticized them for their overemphasis on visible religious practices. Layla consistently wore the hijab but alternated long colorful skirts and loose long-sleeved tops with the occasional *abaya*. She claimed that experimenting with different styles and avoiding solely black outfits helped her look “a little less Muslim” in order “not to stick out” in non-Muslim social settings. However, she frequently argued with her father, who actively encouraged her to don the jilbaab like her mother. Layla responded by emphasizing that in Islam “exterior appearances” were not as important as developing good character. Whereas for Layla’s parents only the jilbaab was sufficiently modest, she was determined not to perform a religious practice in order to please her parents. “I’ve never really cared about doing things to please my parents if it goes against my religion. Like the jilbaab, I wasn’t going to wear it to please my dad, the intention is wrong... I do things to please God and so far as it’s considered modest, that’s ok.” She explained, like Zaynab, that this emphasis on the “exterior” was common amongst the older generation of Somalis, and was motivated by “cultural” concerns, performed out of social obligation rather than through a reasoned understanding of their religion. Whereas Zaynab praised her mother for her commitment to Islamic practices, Layla dismissed her parents’ sartorial preferences as “unauthentic”.

For Layla the hijab is first and foremost an Islamic obligation, and modesty a virtue acquired through the coordination of outward practices and inward dispositions (Mahmood 2005:135). External practices, she explained, are crucial for motivational purposes, and for making her “more aware” of the proper inculcation of inner dispositions of modesty and humility. However, her emphasis on being “less Muslim” also points to her flexible negotiation of external practices. For Layla, this is a

reaction to the over-determination of exterior signs of difference, which she experienced at university, and through her family's "cultural" practice of Islam. Her efforts resemble Fernando's (2014:50-51) Muslim French interlocutors, who seek to "Frenchify" their practice of Islam. Layla was similarly striving to be "unremarkable"—to be neither hypervisible nor invisible by removing the hijab (*ibid* 2014:79). Not all her friends agreed with this negotiation, and some, including Ifrah, were critical of the way in which Layla adapted her hijab to "fit social contexts", rather than employing it as a means of submitting to God and striving towards a pious ideal.

Furthermore, although external practices remain crucial, Layla also points to the importance of interior dimensions of the self. Her critique of her father's excessive preoccupation with external practices, and her own flexible attitude to clothing, point to her reworking of external practices, such as the hijab, as manifestations of her inner intentions, virtues, and dispositions. In forwarding this position, Layla is appropriating a dominant view within public discourses around religion, which assumes that religious practices are merely signs or outward manifestations of religious conscience and religious choice (Fernando 2010).

While external practices can vary depending on context, interior values, dispositions and intentions ought to remain consistent, according to Layla. Zaynab similarly views external practices as crucial, but stresses the importance of working from the "inside-out". While recognizing the dialectic, mutually constitutive relationship between interior and exterior processes of the self (Mahmood 2005), these young women are prioritising an interior self and its relationship with God. Albeit in different ways, they are shifting the relationship between interiority and exteriority and transforming

the Islamic discursive tradition from within. This process unfolds along generational differences, but also, in Layla's case, in reaction to the problematization of external signs of religious difference, such as the hijab.⁹ Before elaborating further on these generational dynamics, I turn to Layla and Zaynab's disagreements over their marital aspirations.

Imagining a Professional, Practising Somali man

Zaynab had not expected that her idea of organizing an exclusively Somali marriage event would have elicited such disagreement among the group. After all, marrying a Somali spouse was a fairly common practice, even amongst the younger generations in London.¹⁰ Somali society is based on patrilineal descent, with children tracing their genealogy through the father's line (Lewis 1994:19-20); marrying a Somali man is a way of ensuring that one's children will have a place within this genealogy which is an important dimension of Somali identity. As I describe below, for many young women, such as Zaynab, marrying a Somali man is a way of maintaining a connection to Somali kin, culture and society. Furthermore, as Zaynab maintained, her preference for a Somali spouse was also a way of acting as a "good daughter", "respecting" her parents and kin by choosing someone with a shared heritage with whom they could converse and relate. Zaynab's family also placed pressure on her to marry a Somali man, but they never sought to arrange or assist a meeting with a potential husband.

For Zaynab, the prospect of marrying a "practising Somali" was a way of reconciling kinship ties with her pious pursuits—her relationship with her mother and kin, and with God. But Layla saw things differently. She was reluctant to attend the event as she was "completely uninterested" in marrying Somali men. As revealed by her views on the jilbaab, she was less concerned with pleasing her parents than her Creator.

Furthermore, she was worried that by limiting the event by ethnicity, the young women were in fact “segregating” themselves. In using the term “segregation” she was echoing and responding to a discourse around the demise of multiculturalism that has come to dominate public debate on migration and diversity in Europe.

Over the last decade, the UK has witnessed a growing backlash against multiculturalism and an emphasis on national identity, cohesion and common values (Vertovec and Wessendorf 2010, Grillo 2007). As elsewhere in Europe, an anti-Muslim sentiment has meant that multiculturalism has become inseparable from the supposed “problem” of Islam. In the post 9/11 climate, and increasingly following the July 2005 bombings in London, the Muslim problem in the UK has been debated through the lens of security, as Muslims have been associated with a global discourse of cultural dysfunctionality, separatism, violence, and terrorism (Meer, Dwyer, and Modood 2010, Werbner 2009).

Layla was concerned that by limiting the event to a single ethnicity her friends were choosing to segregate themselves from mainstream society, though unlike public debates “segregation” here referred to ethnicity rather than religion. She frequently chastised her mother’s generation—referring to public critiques of segregated communities—as they were the ones who “hung out only with Somalis”. In contrast, her own generation were, and ought to be, involved in multicultural Britain. Whereas Zaynab was likely to associate with other Somali women regardless of their interest in religion, Layla’s friends were all relatively pious, but more diverse in terms of ethnicity. Expectedly, Layla thus preferred to open up the marriage event to Muslims from different ethnic backgrounds.¹¹

Zaynab disagreed. She insisted that marrying a *professional* Somali man was a way of ensuring that she was not “segregating” herself. The discourse of “practising professionalism” partly echoes the notion of the “pious modern” described by Deeb (2006) in her ethnography of women in Beirut. As with my interlocutors, “modernness” to pious women in Beirut is inseparable from spiritual progress and refers both to an “authenticated Islam” as well as to ideas of progress, civilization, and material development. Yet the notion of “professionalism”, used by Zaynab, also emphasizes a sense of belonging to a middle- or middle-upper class, white-collar profession, and is therefore more closely associated with notions of work, social status, and financial and material aggrandizement. For Deeb’s (2006) informants, enacting a pious modern self entails discarding certain Western practices and discourses such as those of materialism and social status, whereas in the discourse on “practising professionals” these are not treated as necessarily incompatible with pious pursuits. This notion of the “professionalism” was captured in Zaynab’s magazine project through its high-quality glossy design, and its articles and photographs documenting young fashionable Somalis at parties and luxurious holiday destinations. It sought to counter media depictions of Somalis as a socially problematic refugee community not by demonstrating their ability to mix with other ethnicities, but by showcasing Somalis’ involvement in a middle-upper class cosmopolitan life. Zaynab’s aspirations for social mobility were also evident in her move, following university, away from what she regarded as the poorer working class areas of the city. Seeking a professional job enabled her, like many of these young women, to aspire to an upwardly mobile life. Marriage, she hoped, was another way to achieve this.

Furthermore, the term “professional” also points to its opposite, in this case the “abjected subject” (Ewing 2008) of the “traditional” or “cultural” Somali man.

Whereas for Ewing the “abjected” man within the German national imaginary is applied to all Turkish men, in this case these young women used the discourse to apply it only to some categories of Somali men, particularly those who embody stereotypical and undesirable characteristics. These young women project onto these men all the attributes of an undesirable marital relationship. Traditional men are thought to be uneducated and thus speak little English, to have “old-fashioned” manners, ways of speaking, comportment, and dress and, furthermore, hold traditional ideas about marriage and gender equality. They are criticized for not having, or for not desiring, an egalitarian companionate relationship based on mutual choice. Respect for women’s equality is employed as an instrument of modernity and used as a sign of a “professional” man (Butler 2008, Ewing 2008). Moreover, for some women, “traditional” men are rarely employed in professions which these young women would deem suitable.

Throughout the organization of the event the young women put in place several filters in order to effectively spot “traditional” men. Having been assigned the task of registering the participants, I received regular phone calls from the women, who were curious to know who had called and whether I deemed any to be suitable candidates. I was told to ascertain the level of English of the enquirers by listening attentively to their accent and language skills, and to enquire as to their educational background and current employment status. This would identify whether they were, in my friends’ words, “traditional” men. If the men demonstrated insufficient conversational English, or inadequate employment prospects, I was told to cut them off the list.

Reflecting on kin relations

This notion of “tradition” is similarly projected onto the young women’s parents and older kin. As noted above, the young women view their parents’ religious practice as “cultural” because it focuses on an unreasoned application of practices, and prioritizes exteriority above interior intentions, emotions, and forms of reasoning. Similarly, many of these younger women view their parents’ marriages as “traditional” and “arranged” rather than based on choice,¹² and as “dysfunctional” due to high rates of divorce and single-parent households. Divorces, which were frequent in precolonial Somali society (Lewis 1994:61-65), continue to be common among the first generation of Somalis in the diaspora (Griffiths 2002, Affi 1997). While this has become a public concern among many Somalis, the trope of the “dysfunctional” single parent household has also been problematically linked to criminality and unemployment within public and policy debates about Somalis in Britain.¹³

Young people appropriate this public discourse in casting their parents’ marriage practices as “dysfunctional” and “traditional”, presenting their own marital aspirations in contrast to these stereotyped depictions. They project a different view of marriage, based around the conjugal couple, and a nuclear family with limited interference from both natal and marital kin. They also strive for long-term marital stability, employment, and families with fewer children. The problematic marital relation is attributed in part to the unreflexive embracement of what they regard as “traditional” norms within the marriage. As the following incident demonstrates, the discourse of “religion and culture” has been employed in advancing these critiques.

In January 2011, I attended a one-day Islamic marriage course led by *Sheikh Rabbani*¹⁴ with a group of young practising women. “Marriage is the key test of good character, it is half our *deen* (religion) because you are relating to creation (the other

half refers to one's relationship to God). No relationship tests like marriage does; it nurtures good character", the scholar explained at the start, stressing the relational dimensions of marriage. One of the recurring themes addressed by both Rabbani and the participants was the issue of how to deal with parents who disapproved of a marriage with an individual from a different community, cultural background, or ethnic group. The *Sheikh* advised that while Muslims had an obligation to be good, gentle, respectful, and righteous towards their parents, they did not necessarily have to obey them. "If parents say no to someone who is of 'good character' and good in *deen* (religion), then hold your ground. Don't get angry, speak to them with respect, just address their concerns."

A few weeks later, when I met with Zaynab, Layla, and several others, a young woman who had been present at the course mentioned the scholar's comments on parental obligations and the importance of respecting kin, and acting in a good way towards them. Virtuous behavior towards one's kin was testament of one's pious comportment, she elaborated. Since marriage was "half our *deen*", this included relations to husband and children, but also to parents and other kin. While Zaynab agreed with the young woman, Layla, who had been listening attentively, disagreed that marriage was only about relations in the *dunya* (this earth). "Marriage is about connecting with God... it should be done for the sake of Allah", she exclaimed, and not "for one's parents", reiterating a similar point made in relation to her choice of clothing. According to Layla "religion" ought to take precedence over parental, or what she termed, "cultural" concerns.

The "religion versus culture" discourse has been discussed at length in the literature as a way in which second-generation Muslims in Europe separate an "authentic" and

universal Islam from tradition and culture (Ewing 2008, Roy 2004, Jacobson 1998). Whereas an attachment to traditions denotes a connection to a country or region of origin, religion is understood as an attachment to an absolute truth and to a global *umma* or community of believers (Jacobson 1997). The fact that this discourse plays out across generational differences is unique to the European context. Bolognani and Mellor (2012:215-6) note how the “religion vs. culture” paradigm is employed by young British Pakistanis to emphasize the importance of individual preferences in marriage, to criticize the prioritization of customs, and hence to counter parental will. They argue that these forms of differentiation, between “cultural” first-generation parents and “authentically religious” second-generation youth should not, therefore, be seen as descriptions of generational differences. Rather, they contend that these historically specific discourses are employed strategically by young Muslims as a means through which to differentiate themselves from kin, parents and a “traditional” past.

My research shows how young Somali pious women similarly use the discourse of “religion and culture” to distance themselves from their kin, to criticize the prioritization of “cultural” practices, and to stress individual preferences. In Layla’s attitude towards her parents, and her criticism of the marriage event, for example, religion and culture refer to two oppositional categories of practices and values, with the former elevated above the latter. These categories are connected to self-other relations so that prioritizing religion also means elevating one’s relation with God over kinship relations.

However, the discourse is also used to understand religion and culture as mutually reinforcing categories. For Zaynab religion ought to be paramount, but social

obligations and relations with kin are not inseparable from religious norms and a commitment to God. Islamic discourses can be employed strategically to advocate choice and autonomy, as in Layla's case, but also to advocate respect vis-à-vis one's kin in marriage, as in Zaynab's case.

Moreover, the paradigm is not employed solely to refer to sets of practices and values, but also to a particular *attitude* towards both religion and what are deemed to be Somali culture, traditions, and values. "Traditional" or "cultural" Somalis are thought to be ignorant, acting out of habit, lacking in choice, and unable to engage with cultural and religious norms in an informed and reasoned way. Zaynab's critique of "tradition", therefore, is not a rejection of "Somali traditions" *per se*, but a critique of a particular mode of engagement (Foucault, 1985:26-28) with the notion of Somali tradition. These "traditional" men, who act out of habit, are juxtaposed with "educated" or "professional" Somali men, who are thought to be attached to their culture and religion in a conscious and self-reflexive way. Similarly, a "cultural" attitude towards religion involves an unreflexive acceptance of norms and practices, as reflected in Layla and Zaynab's critiques of their parents.

These young women are employing a discourse of choice, whereby culture and religion are treated as a "background" that can be "entered" and "exited" at will (Brown 2006:301). According to Wendy Brown (2006) liberalism has imagined and positioned non-liberal people as ruled by culture in opposition to liberal people who *have* culture. This juxtaposition is played out in a series of oppositions between non-liberalised culture and moral autonomy, freedom, and equality. The liberal subject is assumed to have an ability to abstract herself from a context, and culture is thus rendered extrinsic rather than constitutive of the subject; it becomes "food, dress,

music, lifestyle, and contingent values” (*ibid* 2006:301). This attitude, described by Brown, manifests itself within the reformist discourse of “religion and culture”, but also undergirds popular representations of Somalis in Britain as incapacitated by their culture and traditions. Young pious Somali women are drawing on and twisting these notions by positioning their mothers as determined by culture, and imagining themselves as autonomous agents, able to articulate an “optional” relationship to Somali culture and to religious practice, as we saw earlier. Whereas their parents and kin are positioned by them as incapacitated by culture, they, on the other hand, are able to choose what should and should not be embraced. By labeling their mothers’ generation as cultural—and as we saw earlier as “segregated”—these young women are however, delegitimizing the experiences of the older generations (Fernando 2014:54), casting them as unintegrated citizens within multicultural Britain.

A detailed explanation of what being Somali entails for these young people is beyond the scope of this paper. My intention, rather, is to delineate a particular attitude that these young women employ *vis-à-vis* religion, culture, and Somali kin.¹⁵ Zaynab’s insistence that “marrying a Somali man is a way of maintaining my culture” illustrates the way in which marriage enables her to maintain a *willing* engagement with kin, Somali society, and with a set of cultural values and practices. Unlike Layla, Zaynab is more concerned with stressing her Somali and Muslim identities, as a way of demonstrating her willing engagement with both culture and religion.

Finally, this particular mode of engagement towards religion and culture is also inseparable from ideas of material and intellectual progress. By favoring an “optional relationship” to culture, these young women establish a novel imagined relationship with their kin and husbands based on choice and equality, intersected by notions of

emancipation and material progress, hence their preference for “professionals”.

Both women emphasize the importance of choice, but for Layla choosing involves separating one’s self from kin and traditional others, and prioritizing a commitment to piety. For Zaynab one can exercise choice while maintaining an attachment to kin and to a Somali identity, by selecting a Somali spouse who has a “non cultural” attitude to both faith and culture. These two contrasting ways of negotiating discourses of piety and culture, social obligations, a desire for social mobility, and public discourses on Somali migrants, engage the ethical imagination in slightly different ways. Through the organization of the event, Zaynab and her friends cultivate a fantasized relation to the idealized figure of the Somali, practising, professional man. In so doing, they seek to re-configure new relations not only to a husband, but also to kin, non-Muslim others, and to God. Some relations are engaged through choice, reason, and reflection; others are fantasized and imagined. Some are based on their own experiences, for example of living and interacting with kin, while others are based on abstract ideas and imaginaries gained from public discourses, texts, or ideals of professionalism. “Marriage talk”, therefore, offers an interesting site from which to view the ways that contradictory or overlapping forms of knowledge are reconciled or negotiated, and are tied to relations between self and other.

In what follows I turn to Ifrah, and to another incident of “marriage talk”, to show how this also involved re-configuring her self-other relations, albeit in a different way.

Love Jane Austen style

I met Ifrah in the first few months of my fieldwork while volunteering at a Somali arts

event. In her mid-20s she lived and worked in East London and had for some time been actively involved in various community initiatives in the area. When we met she had only just started practising and adopting the abaya and hijab. She was struggling in dealing with judgments from her non-practising peers, and reconciling her practice of Islam with her participation in Somali events, which often entailed music and dancing in mixed-gender social environments.

Whereas a few years previously Ifrah had been uninterested in marriage, this changed as she began to take the practice of Islam more seriously. However, she insisted that in order for marriage to last, it had to be based on love. It was for this reason that she had been hesitant about the marriage event proposed by Zaynab. As an avid consumer of Hollywood comedies, and romantic novels, and like many other young practising women in their mid 20s, she wanted, and expected, to “fall in love.”

She frequently spoke of love in relation to Jane Austen’s novels and film reproductions. With her close friend Sumaya, another young practising friend in her late 20s, she had seen the BBC production of *Pride and Prejudice* about a dozen times, and, together, they had contemplated planning a *Pride and Prejudice* fancy dress party. I also heard the two women discuss on one occasion how Elizabeth Bennet, the main protagonist of the novel, could have been Muslim, as she embodied all the virtues of a Muslim wife: modesty, humility, honesty, and intelligence. They also saw Elizabeth’s critical attitude towards social mores and norms as reflecting their own criticisms of older kin’s cultural practices. Yet, Elizabeth’s continued respect towards her kin echoed the notion expressed by Zaynab, that respecting kin was itself an Islamic virtue. Elizabeth was outspoken, not afraid to speak her mind, and was certainly not submissive to male authority, particularly in her relationship

with Darcy, her future husband. Choice in spouse was paramount for Elizabeth as it was for Ifrah and many other practising women. Furthermore, Elizabeth initially rejects Darcy for his arrogance and disrespect towards her family, despite recognizing his vast wealth, and only accepts him after he has apologized and endeavored to change his ways. To the young women, this reinforced their belief that love was ultimately more important than wealth and social mobility, although of course the latter were not irrelevant to their lives.

Most importantly, Ifrah and Sumaya longed for this kind of love relationship, one in which love arose as a spontaneous emotion between the couple, but also developed as a consequence of learning about each other. In the novel, Elizabeth only begins to love Darcy after she has *learnt* to overcome her pride and prejudice, and to see Darcy for who he really is, with his “true” characteristics and virtues. The kind of love relationship envisioned by these young women involved negotiating between idealized notions of romantic, virtuous and spiritual love gained through Islamic teachings. I elaborate on each in turn.

On a late summer evening while sitting in my house after dinner with a few friends Ifrah suggested that she believed in soul mates—in the idea “that two people can be so alike and complement each other, and they just know and feel it...” Layla nodded in agreement and was quick in providing Quranic evidence for the existence of soul mates. Zaynab, however, looked up from her smart phone and retorted: “I’m skeptical. Love is overrated and it never lasts... anyway love like it is in the movies doesn’t exist.” Zaynab rejected this “fictionalization” of love (Gell 2011) and adopted a more pragmatic approach to marriage. Ifrah, however, responded by pointing out that she agreed that love was typically represented in Western films as superficial or

as lustful based on physical attraction, but that this was not in fact *real* love, the form of romantic love found, for example, in other films and novels such as *Pride and Prejudice*.

Spiritual love, which draws on Sufi inspired teachings, was frequently juxtaposed to notions of Western love. During one of our conversations Sumaya drew on a lecture by Yasmin Mogahed, a popular Muslim scholar from the US, on the topic of Muslim women's empowerment in marriage.¹⁶ Mogahed had contrasted two types of love. The first type, based on what "you get from them [husbands], how they make you feel", is ultimately unstable and can never be fully satisfied. Another type of love arises between people who love each other for what they are: "The beauty you see in them is a reflection of the Creator... Learn to love in the right way... for Him, through Him and by Him", she argued. Love for one's husband ought to ideally be an extension of one's love for God.

Sumaya felt that Mogahed had accurately represented the notion of spiritual love to which she should aspire. Husbands should be loved "for the sake of God", as the most important relationship to cultivate on earth was that between self and God, she reiterated. Husbands should serve as a means to help one forge this intimate connection with the transcendent. This point reflected Layla's views on the hijab, which should be worn solely to please God and not one's parents.

Furthermore, this love could not always be expected to arise spontaneously. Just as one had to learn to love God by "seeking knowledge", the same went for one's husband. While praise and worship is reserved solely for God, love can be learnt by appreciating a husband's naturally good traits (*fitra*), and his pious virtues. According to the young women, love was an intense and unique emotional experience, one that

did not necessarily arise naturally, but could be “worked on” or “learnt”.

This attitude to love, which prioritizes the self-God relationship, draws on Sufi teachings and is similarly reflected in Layla and Zaynab’s emphasis on interiority. An intimate connection with God lies at the heart of these young women’s conceptions of the spiritualization of the romantic relationship; love between a man and a woman is seen as way of accessing divine love (Samuel 2011:320). It points to a view of marriage that prioritizes one’s relation with God and spouse above extended family.

This form of love was considered sufficient for some. Zaynab, for example, insisted that by looking to God for inspiration they would find a deeper experience, one based on “spiritual love.” The marriage event, in their eyes, was not “unromantic”; it simply required that love be seen as an emotion that arises from a sincere and affective relationship between self and God. Love might not arise spontaneously at the event but, God willing, they would “learn to love, for the sake of Allah.”

Yet for Ifrah this form of love was insufficient, as the event simply lacked spontaneity. An emphasis on love “Jane Austen style” was a way of reconciling a notion of a “Western” spontaneous love with spiritual love. This contrasts with recent scholarship on marriage which has positioned Islamic reformist movements as opposed to, and critical of, romance relationships (Marsden 2007, Masquelier 2009, Schielke 2010a). Here we see how these young women seek to reconcile their quests for piety with ideas of a romantic, spontaneous love. They do so by drawing on films and novels as well as Islamic lectures and texts, and emphasizing certain elements—in this case love, choice, and equality—as constitutive of multiple different discourses available to them in the UK.

Furthermore, by drawing on the narratives from *Pride and Prejudice* these young women are further positioning themselves in different ways in relation to “Western” or “British” society. In criticizing the moral deficiencies of certain elements of globalized Western love, such as lust, they turn to what is regarded as traditional English culture for inspiration: victorian values, norms and manners exhibited in the novel. These were deemed to align with Muslim values. Contrary to public perceptions of Muslim women as foreign and different from British society, these young women insert themselves within the history of the nation, presenting themselves as embodying traditional English values and, hence, as already part of the nation. These narratives were also in accordance with the teachings of one of their favorite scholars and academics, *Sheikh Abdul Hakim-Murad*¹⁷, who argued in a lecture entitled *British and Muslim*:

“Islam, once we have become familiar with it, and settled onto it comfortably, is the most suitable for the British. Its values are our values. Its moderate, undemonstrative style of piety... its insistence on modesty and a certain reserve, and... on common sense and on pragmatism, combine to furnish the most natural and easy religious option for our people.”

The scholar’s claim challenges a dominant discourse which questions the compatibility of Muslim and British values. Rather, his contention is that British values are in fact akin to Islamic values, and, thus, do not require learning or appropriation by Muslims—Muslims are already British.

By inserting themselves within English, and hence British society¹⁸, these young women are also making social class visible (Edwards *et al* 2012:12). The contemporary moment in Britain has been characterized by a shift away from the politics of social class towards a post-colonial multiculturalism based around notions

of ethnicity and cultural nationalism (Evans 2012). Through appropriating the character of Elizabeth Bennet, young practising Somali women such as Sumaya and Ifrah are challenging this de-politicization of social class by inserting themselves, whether intentionally or not, within discourses of class. In so doing, they are also placing themselves within a notion of traditional English society structured around class hierarchies. Furthermore, *Pride and Prejudice* presents a narrative of social mobility through marriage, one that reflects these women's desire for a "professional" man. These discussions about ideal husbands offer a means of imagining themselves within the class system, while striving for a higher social status.

Ifrah and Sumaya's aspirations for a "Muslim Darcy" provide another example of how they negotiate contrasting ideals, conventions, aspirations and desires. On the one hand they seek to reconcile Sufi inspired teachings with idioms of romantic love, and manage public discourses on Muslims as well as their aspirations for social and class mobility. Their discussions also point to how romantic love is not necessarily juxtaposed to pragmatic and financial considerations (Osella 2012, De Munck 1996).

On the other hand, in employing these various discourses and ideals they engage the ethical imagination. Through these ideals, the young women articulate novel imagined relations to potential husbands, but simultaneously re-work their relations with multiple others; they forge an intimate connection with God, and re-position themselves within public discourses and debates around social class, multiculturalism, and British values.

As with the discussions around the halal marriage event, these exchanges shed light on the imaginative, experimental, and aspirational processes involved in these women's marriage debates. As Khan (2012) notes, Muslims in Pakistan are

continuously striving to be better Muslims and to define the relationship between Pakistan and Islam. Nevertheless, the question regarding who is a Muslim remains unanswered, and the kind of Islamic state for which they strive remains obscure. The future is open to multiple possibilities, as striving involves an expectation that outcomes cannot be fully anticipated.

This is not necessarily the case for young pious Somali women, whose efforts are geared towards particular endpoints and trajectories. As I have shown, these women are seeking “ideal husbands” by engaging different “moral rubrics” in relation to enlarged notions of the self and other. Yet, notwithstanding this, for many young women, I suggest, the endpoint is less important than the processes of striving. Finding an “ideal husband” often proves to be a challenging mission, and many of these young women come to accept the impossibility of ever finding their ideal spouse.

What I have illustrated here, however, is that striving continues, despite the failure of the halal marriage event, and the difficulties of finding an ideal companion. “Marriage talk” highlights processes that are often missing in accounts of pious self-formation. It sheds light on practices of reflecting, imagining, and engaging creatively with the ethical imagination (Moore 2011)—processes that propel these women to engage in various projects of the self. Discussions around marriage provide a space in which to articulate and imagine new ways of being, and re-fashion their relations with self and other. But these debates are open-ended; through discussions around an “ideal husband” the young women creatively engage with the questions of what it means to be pious, educated, Somali, and British, with the possibility that their answers might change with time, and that they may never achieve these endpoints. Marriage debates

capture the impetus to keep striving with the “expectation that outcomes are not fully knowable in advance”, and to aspire towards an “as-yet-unattained self” (Khan 2012:55).

Marriage talk, aspiration and the ethical imagination

Discussions on marriage offer a privileged site from which to view not only the coexistence of new and existing moral discourses, ideals, values and norms, but also the ways in which these are taken up to re-imagine self-other relations. In discussing the event, Zaynab merged notions of professionalism, with pious ideals and social and cultural obligations towards kin, while Ifrah joined notions of romantic and spiritual love. Both drew on a set of discourses, ideals, values, and aspirations, or using Schielke’s (2010a) term, different “moral registers”, such as discourses of piety, social obligations towards kin, romantic love, and professionalism.

For some young women these “registers” are clearly demarcated; for others the distinctions are less clear-cut. For some they are contradictory; for others they are reconcilable. According to Layla, for example, a religious attitude is not only distinct to a cultural one, but religion and culture are different “moral registers” which coexist and contrast with one another. For Zaynab, on the other hand, certain “cultural values” are also Islamic and, therefore, the two rubrics overlap and can be combined. Similarly, for Ifrah, romantic love is not necessarily incompatible with pious pursuits and notions of spiritual love. Certain values, such as choice and equality, are also claimed to be part of more than one rubric, associated with pious projects, notions of professionalism, liberal discourses around minorities in the UK, and also constitutive of ideas on romantic love. By highlighting these common elements of each register, the women seek to resolve the tensions between them, but also to actively transform

them in the process. Whilst ambiguity and contradiction are important elements of these young women's lives (Schielke 2010a), many also find ways to reconcile and transform these different registers. Their engagements with these multiple registers reveal the ways in which they deal differently with the complexities of their subject positions as Somalis, practising Muslims, and educated women.

Furthermore, each register is not fixed but rather is internally flexible and malleable (Deeb and Harb, 2013). Within the religious register, we have seen how these women might draw on reformist discourses that emphasize authenticity and the correct implementation of religious practices, while also drawing on Sufi-inspired practices of spiritual love. Furthermore, a range of Islamic forms of knowledge informs what "piety" or "practice" mean to these young women. They are not only selecting amongst various jurisprudential interpretations, but also amongst different paths or schools of thought, and combining them in new ways, thus reworking the Islamic discursive tradition from within. Whilst Layla might be more concerned with articulating a form of Islam that is compatible with being British, Ifrah's critique of her sartorial choice indicates that this is not necessarily a concern for her.

As I have shown, these young women exhibit different ways of understanding and negotiating their pious pursuits. Nonetheless, they also share common experiences of practising Islam, having met through their quests to "seek Islamic knowledge" at a time of their life when marriage concerns are paramount. For many of these women, the experience of practising involves distancing themselves from their kin, re-imagining their relations to friends and God, and managing how they are viewed by non-practising friends or a non-Muslim public. Marriage, in this case, is revealing of changes that occur across generational lines, but which are also connected to a

particular stage in these women's life courses, as they engage with Islamic reformist discourses in relation to multiple other forms of knowledge. Diversities and disagreements amongst the women reveal that these changes are neither unilinear nor coherent, but rather recursive and fluctuating in nature.

The idea that marriage can provide a useful lens onto processes of social, political, and economic change is nothing new to anthropological scholarship (Ahearn 2001, Donner 2002, Hirsch and Wardlow 2006). Much of this work has focused on the idiom of love and companionate marriage which has become increasingly widespread as a consequence of the global spread of discourses and practices of development and modernity (Hirsch and Wardlow 2006, Ahearn 2001, Faier 2007). The emphasis in this article is somewhat different to this body of work. Rather than examining the spread of one particular trope, I have focused on the intersections between different discourses and ideals. Furthermore, I have demonstrated how these are not separate from the self, and do not exist as external tropes or narratives but are deeply embedded in people's lives. I have focused on how various discourses and ideals are taken up by individuals, and the meanings that they have for those who appropriate, respond to, or resist them. The identification with particular forms of knowledge creates novel forms of belonging, and novel performances of the self, as they enable individuals to imagine new relations with others and new forms of engagement with the world (Moore 2011:8).

This article has also built on both the literature on pious self-fashioning (Mahmood 2005) and on the complexly constituted Muslim subject (Schielke 2010a, Deeb and Harb 2013). Schielke has focused on the everyday lives of Muslims, developing a phenomenological approach that investigates how daily lives and "grand schemes"—

or rubrics—come together, and how ideas travel, transform, and become part of people’s lives. But the result has been a privileging of the *teleologies* of the subject, rather than a focus on subjectivity. Whereas his analysis points to the ways in which subjectivity is based on an ability to manage ambiguity and contestation, the question of exactly how these *teleologies* are engaged or contested is left unexplored. I argue that the anthropology of Islamic piety and subjectivity has prioritized the social cultural constructions of subjects and neglected the formation of subjectivities as “complex structures of thought, feeling, reflection...” that animate acting subjects (Ortner 2005:37). Subjectivities are more than the occupants of particular subject positions within social, economic, and religious structures, but are constituted in relation to self and other through forms of identification and dis-identification which are discursive, embodied, affective and imagined (Moore 2011:76).

Debates and discussions on marriage offer an ideal site from which to view the ways in which cultural and social formations come together with processes that “animate acting subjects”. As I have shown, the self is always a part of a “dynamic relational matrix” (Long and Moore 2013a), which comes to be re-imagined through debates around marriage. What is particularly interesting is the way in which these different relationalities are connected with each other. As these women imagine novel relations with potential husbands, they simultaneously transform their relations *vis-à-vis* Somali kin, and God. Shifting one form of self-other relation involves transforming the entire matrix. Intersubjectivity is crucial to understanding the complexly situated Muslim subject.

Marriage is not only a site for self-reflexivity—for standing back and reflecting—but also one that engages the imagination. This process is most evident in these young

women's attachments to imagined notions of potential spouses. Marriage offers the women this space for re-thinking and imagining a different future and novel forms of belonging, and is thus a critical space for aspiration and change. The lives of young pious Muslim women in Britain need to be understood in relation to these forms of aspiration and experimentation that are partly enabled through the appropriation and reworking of pious discourses in relation to other "moral registers". A focus on aspiration might also offer us a way of understanding what motivates educated Somali Muslim women to strive to practise Islam in Britain.

Acknowledgements

This article was written during a Leverhulme Early Career Fellowship at the University of Oxford. The LSE PhD Fellowship also supported the fieldwork and some of the writing. I am deeply grateful to Henrietta Moore and Mathijs Pelkmans for their guidance throughout the research, and for their critical engagements at various stages of the writing process. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers of *Anthropological Quarterly* for their valuable suggestions, and John Bowen, Agnes Hann, Micheál Ó Floinn, Caroline Osella, Kaveri Qureshi, Sertaç Sehlikoglu, and Anna Tuckett for reading and commenting on earlier drafts. A version of this article was presented at the conference on *Probing the Intimate: Cross-Cultural Queries of Proximity and Beyond* at the University of Cambridge. Last but not least, this article was made possible thanks to my Somali friends and interlocutors in London, to whom I am forever grateful.

Bibliography

- Affi, Ladan. (1997). 'The Somali Crisis in Canada: The Single Mother Phenomenon.' In *Mending Rips in the Sky: Options for Somali Communities in the 21st century*, edited by H.M. Adam & R. Ford, 441-448. Lawrenceville, NJ: The Red Sea Press.
- Ahearn, Laura M. (2001). *Invitations to Love: Literacy, Love Letters, and Social Change in Nepal*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press.
- Ahmad, Fauzia. (2012). 'Graduating Towards marriage? Attitudes towards Marriage and Relationships among University-Educated British Muslim women.' *Culture and Religion: An Interdisciplinary journal* 13 (2).

- Ahmed, Ali Jemale, ed. 1994. *The Invention of Somalia*. Lawrenceville, N.J: Red Sea Press.
- Asad, Talal. (1986). *The Idea of the Anthropology of Islam*. Washington, D.C: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies.
- Besteman, Catherine. (1996). 'Violent Politics and the Politics of Violence: the dissolution of the Somali nation-state.' *American Ethnologist* 23 (3):579-596.
- Birt, Jonathan. (2005). 'Wahhabism in the United Kingdom: Manifestations and Reactions.' In *Transnational Connections and the Arab Gulf*, edited by Madawi Al-Rasheed. London; New York: Routledge.
- Bolognani, Marta, and Mellor, Jody. (2012). 'British Pakistani Women's Use of the 'Religion versus Culture' Contrast: A Critical Analysis.' *Culture and Religion: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 13 (2).
- Brown, Wendy. (2006). 'Subjects of Tolerance: Why We Are Civilized and They Are the Barbarians.' In *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*, edited by H.de Vries and L.E. Sullivan, 298- 317. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Butler, Judith. (2008). 'Sexual Politics, Torture, and Secular Time.' *The British Journal of Sociology* 59 (1):1-23.
- De Munck, Victor C. (1996). 'Love and marriage in a Sri Lankan Muslim Community: Toward a Reevaluation of Dravidian Marriage Practices.' *American Ethnologist* 23 (4):698-716.
- Deeb, Lara. (2006). *An Enchanted Modern : Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon, Princeton studies in Muslim politics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Deeb, Lara, and Harb, Mona. (2013). *Leisurely Islam: Negotiating Geography and Morality in Shi'ite South Beirut*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press.
- Donner, Henrike. (2002). 'One's Own Marriage: Love Marriages in a Calcutta Neighbourhood.' *South Asia Research* 22 (1):79-94. doi: 10.1177/026272800202200104.
- Edwards, Jeanette, Evans, Gillian, and Smith, Katherine. (2012). 'Introduction: The middle classification of Britain.' *Focaal--Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology* 62:3-16.
- Evans, Gillian. (2012). "'The aboriginal people of England': The culture of class politics in contemporary Britain.' *Focaal--Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology* 62:17-29.
- Ewing, Katherine P. (2008). *Stolen Honor: Stigmatizing Muslim Men in Berlin*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

- Fadil, Nadia. (2009). 'Managing Affects and Sensibilities: The case of Not-Handshaking and Not-Fasting.' *Social Anthropology* 17 (4):439-454.
- Faier, Lieba. (2007). 'Filipina Migrants in Rural Japan and Their Professions of Love.' *American Ethnologist* 34 (1):148-162. doi: 10.1525/ae.2007.34.1.148.
- Faubion, James. D. (2001). 'Toward an Anthropology of Ethics: Foucault and the Pedagogies of Autopoiesis.' *Representations* 74 (1):83-104.
- Fernando, Mayanthi L. (2010). 'Reconfiguring freedom: Muslim piety and the limits of secular law and public discourse in France.' *American Ethnologist* 37 (1):19-35.
- Fernando, Mayanthi L. (2014). *The Republic Unsettled: Muslim French and the Contradictions of Secularism*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Foucault, Michel. (1985). *The History of Sexuality. Vol II: The Use of Pleasure* (trans. R. Hurley). New York: Pantheon.
- Foucault, Michel. (1990). *The History of Sexuality. Vol III: The Care of the Self* (trans. R. Hurley). . Harmondsworth.: Penguin.
- Gell, Alfred. (2011). 'On Love.' *Anthropology of this Century* 2.
- Griffiths, David. (2002). *Somali and Kurdish Refugees in London: New identities in the Diaspora*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Grillo, Ralph. (2007). 'An Excess of Alterity? Debating Difference in a Multicultural Society.' *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 30 (6):979-998.
- Hirsch, Jennifer, S., and Wardlow, Holly, eds. 2006. *Modern loves: The Anthropology of Romantic Courtship and Companionate Marriage*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Jacobsen, Christine, M. (2010). *Islamic Traditions and Muslim Youth in Norway*. Leiden: Brill.
- Jacobson, Jessica. (1997). 'Religion and Ethnicity: Dual and Alternative Sources of Identity among young British Pakistanis.' *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 20 (2):238-256.
- Jacobson, Jessica. (1998). *Islam in Transition: Religion and Identity among British Pakistani Youth*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Jensen, Tina, G. (2006). 'Religious authority and autonomy intertwined: the case of converts to Islam in Denmark.' *The Muslim World* 96 (4):643-660.
- Jouili, Jeanette. (2009). 'Negotiating Secular Boundaries: Pious Micro-practices of Muslim Women in French and German Public Spheres.' *Social Anthropology* 17 (4):455-470.

- Kaptejins, Lidwien, and Omar, Maryan Ali. (1999). *Women's Voices in a Man's world: Women and the Pastoral Tradition in Northern Somali Orature, c. 1899-1980*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann
- Khan, Naveeda. (2012). *Muslim Becoming: Aspiration and Skepticism in Pakistan*. Durham & London: Duke University Press.
- Laidlaw, James. (2014). *The Subject of Virtue: An Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom, New Departures in Anthropology*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Laitin, David, and Samatar, Said. (1987). *Somalia: Nation in Search of a State*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Lambek, Michael, ed. 2010. *Ordinary Ethics: Anthropology, Language and Action*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Lewis, Ioan M. (1961). *A Pastoral Democracy*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Lewis, Ioan M. (1994). *Blood and Bone: The Call of Kinship in Somali Society*. Lawrenceville, N.J: The Red Sea Press.
- Liberatore, Giulia. 2013. "Transforming the Self: An Ethnography of Ethical Change amongst Young Somali Muslim Women in London." PhD, Anthropology, London School of Economics and Political Science.
- Liberatore, Giulia. (forthcoming). 'Piety and Urban Mobility among Young Somali Women in Multicultural London.' In *Religion and the Global City*, edited by Anna Strhan and David Garbin. London: Bloomsbury.
- Long, Nicholas , J., and Moore, Henrietta, L., eds. 2013a. *The Social Life of Achievement, Wyse Series in Social Anthropology*. New York; London: Berghahn.
- Long, Nicholas, J., and Moore, Henrietta, L. (2013b). *Sociality: New Directions*. New York; Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Mahmood, Saba. (2005). *Politics of Piety : The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton, NJ: University Press.
- Marsden, Magnus. (2007). 'All-Male Sonic Gatherings, Islamic reform, and Masculinity in Northern Pakistan.' *American Ethnologist* 34 (3):473-490.
- Masquelier, Adeline. (2009). 'Lessons from Rubí: Love, Poverty, and the Educational Value of Televised Dramas in Niger.' *Love in Africa*:205-228.
- McGown, Riba, B. (1999). *Muslims in the Diaspora: The Somali Communities of London and Toronto*. Toronto: Univ of Toronto Press.

- Meer, Nasar, Dwyer, Claire, and Modood, Tariq. (2010). 'Embodying Nationhood? Conceptions of British National Identity, Citizenship, and Gender in the 'Veil Affair'.' *The Sociological Review* 58 (1):84-111.
- Moore, Henrietta, L. (2007). *The Subject of Anthropology: Gender, Symbolism and Psychoanalysis*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Moore, Henrietta L. (2011). *Still Life: Hopes, Desires and Satisfaction*s. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Ortner, Sherry. B. (2005). 'Subjectivity and Cultural Critique.' *Anthropological Theory* 5 (1).
- Osella, Caroline. (2012). 'Desires Under Reform: Contemporary Reconfigurations of Family, Marriage, Love and Gendering in a Transnational South Indian Matrilineal Muslim Community.' *Culture and Religion: An Interdisciplinary journal* 13 (2):241-265.
- Osella, Filippo, and Soares, Benjamin. (2010). 'Islam, Politics, Anthropology.' In *Islam, Politics, Anthropology*, edited by Filippo Osella and Benjamin Soares, 1-22. West Sussex; UK: John Wiley and Sons.
- Roy, Olivier. (2004). *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah*. London: Hurst.
- Rozario, Santi. (2011). 'Islamic Piety Against the Family: From 'Traditional'to 'Pure' Islam.' *Contemporary Islam* 5 (3):285-308.
- Samuel, Geoffrey. (2011). 'Islamic Piety and Masculinity.' *Contemporary Islam* 5:309-322.
- Schielke, Samuli. (2010a). 'Being Good in Ramadan: Ambivalence, Fragmentation, and the Moral Self in the Lives of Young Egyptians.' In *Islam, Politics, Anthropology*, edited by Filippo Osella and Benjamin Soares, 23-38. Malden, MA; Oxford, UK: John Wiley & Sons.
- Schielke, Samuli. (2010b). 'Second Thoughts About The Anthropology of Islam, or How to Make Sense of Grand Schemes in Everyday Life.' *Working Papers* (2).
- Schielke, Samuli, and Debevec, Liza. (2012). 'Introduction.' In *Ordinary Lives and Grand schemes: An Anthropology of Everyday Religion*, edited by Samuli Schielke and Liza Debevec, 1-16. New York; Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Vertovec, Steven, and Wessendorf, Susanne, eds. 2010. *The Multiculturalism Backlash: European Discourses, Policies and Practices*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- Werbner, Pnina. (2009). 'Revisiting the UK Muslim Diasporic Public Sphere at a Time of Terror: From Local (benign) Invisible Spaces to Seditious

¹ Names and identities have been altered to protect the anonymity of individuals concerned.

² The young women preferred to use the word "marriage event" instead of "dating event" to indicate their intention to meet a man only with the aim of considering marriage.

³ Many of these young women did not affiliate with a particular reformist movement or tradition. In fact, they rarely distinguished amongst different sources of knowledge, except by drawing a "Sufi-Salafi continuum" (Jensen 2006).

⁴ According to Foucault (2000), "forms of knowledge" refer to acts, practices and thoughts which come to be authoritative at particular moments in time and under specific configurations of power. These forms of knowledge provide the grounds for an ethics of the self—the relationship of the self to itself (see below). They thus define particular *telos* of the subject, or using Schielke's term, distinctive "moral registers."

⁵ Foucault identifies four dimensions to ethics. First, the *ethical substance* refers to a part of the self or mode of behavior upon which the individual works. Second, the *mode of subjectification* refers to the way in which an individual establishes her relationship to the rule. Because the subject is formed within the limits of a historically specific set of practices, this dimension recognizes the ways in which power summons a subject to constitute itself in relation to its moral codes. Third, the *forms of elaboration of ethical work* or the *techniques of the self* refers to the means by which a subject works on the ethical substance and changes itself in order to become ethical. Finally, the *telos* (plural: *teleologies*) of the ethical subject denotes the type of moral being to which one aspires. It is through the practices or techniques of the self that individuals give meaning to, and interpret, their experiences (Foucault 1985: 26-28).

⁶ Deeb and Harb's (2013) concept of "moral rubric" adapts Schielke's "moral registers" in order to capture the potentially more malleable nature of moral ideals, discourses, norms and practices, and to place more emphasis on values.

⁷ An Islamic style of dress that covers the head, and drapes over the chest.

⁸ Teaching styles vary from the more traditional method of learning directly from a text or scholar, to a class focused on a contemporary theme or problem relevant to the lives of Muslims in Britain. Many of the classes I attended during my fieldwork were associated with the South Asian traditions or reform, but I also frequented classes linked with other Islamic "schools of thought" and scholarship from across the Muslim world (Birt 2005).

⁹ For an in depth discussion about the ways in which these young women are prioritizing interiority see Liberatore (2013: Chapter 3).

¹⁰ Amongst the 21 households with whom I conducted fieldwork, four out of twenty younger couples who had been raised in the UK were married to non-Somalis, seven were married amongst members of the same clan and nine to other Somalis from different clans.

¹¹ Many young Somali women maintain ideas of “preferable” ethnicities. Bengali men, for example, are considered less favorably because their marriages are seen to be unequal in terms of gender, with wives expected to live and look after in-laws—a practice that is uncommon within Somali households.

¹² These young women’s portrayals of their parents’ marriages as “arranged” disregard the ways in which discourses of modern love and marriage based on mutual consent were widespread among the urban middle classes of Mogadishu throughout the 1960s-80s (Kapteijns and Omar 1999).

¹³ See Griffiths (2002) and Affi (1997) for a discussion of divorce among Somalis in the diaspora. Most analyses have centred on the first generation, and there is no available data on, or analysis of, divorce rates among the younger generations.

¹⁴ *Sheikh* Faraz Rabbani was born in Karachi, Pakistan but was raised in Toronto, Canada and currently lives in Amman, Jordan. The course he delivered on that occasion was entitled *True Love, Getting Married: Clear and Practical Guidance for Success*. It included an analysis of passages from the *Quran* on marriage, advice on selecting the appropriate spouse, the *fiqh* (law/jurisprudence) of marriage, and a summary of Al-Ghazali’s comments on the ideal characteristics of a spouse, and a final Q & A session.

¹⁵ The questions of who is Somali, and what constitutes Somali identity, tradition and culture are complex ones that date back to the colonial period, but which continue to be a source of debate in the diaspora and the Horn. The discussion has revolved around a tension between those who stress a homogenous Somali identity (Lewis 1961, Laitin and Samatar 1987) and those who point to linguistic, class, sociological and cultural diversity, and the historically constructed nature of a notion of authentic Somali tradition and identity (Ahmed 1994, Besteman 1996, Kapteijns and Omar 1999).

¹⁶ Yasmin Mogahed lives in the US, and holds a B.S. Degree in Psychology and a Masters in Journalism and Mass Communications. She is currently an instructor for New Dawn Institute, and a journalist for the Huffington Post.

¹⁷ *Sheikh* Abdul Hakim a British Ba-Alawi scholar and a lecturer in Islamic Studies at the University of Cambridge, UK.

¹⁸ Interestingly, these young women often identified as “Londoners” (Liberatore forthcoming), stressing a local identity, but also frequently as “British” rather than “English”. The reference to “English values” is a reflection of the dominant role played by traditional English culture in ideas of Britishness and British society.