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## Article

# (De)constructing a Dar-ul-Uloom Aalim's Identity in Contemporary Britain: Overcoming Barriers of Access

Kamal Ahmed  and Sally Elton-Chalcraft \*

Institute of Education, University of Cumbria, Carlisle CA1 2HH, UK

\* Correspondence: sally.elton-chalcraft@cumbria.ac.uk

**Abstract:** The controversial events of 2001 (9/11) and 2005 (7/7) have led Britain's media and policy makers to view the proliferation of orthodox Islamic seminaries, Dar-ul-Uloom (DUs), and their graduates (Ulamaa) with suspicion, further exacerbating the marginalisation of an already marginalised Muslim minority within mainstream British society. Due to ethnic, sociocultural, and religious differences, the identity of Ulamaa in modern-day Britain has become increasingly complex and supposedly contradictory due to the perceived differences between orthodox Islamic values proselytised in DUs and 'liberal' British values. Using an interpretive phenomenological analysis, this paper reports on data collected in 2020 through three in-depth interviews with an Aalim who graduated from a DU in England after 2005. It explores how he constructs and negotiates his religious and national identities. The interviews were undertaken by one of the authors, himself an Aalim, and the paper also provides reflection on the barriers of access to this under-researched group. Data suggest that although DU identity might not contradict British identity, and Islam is not seen as incompatible with British values, the perceived contradictions between DU orthodoxy and British values appear to be conflated with cultural resistances emanating from Britain's colonial legacy in India; the birthplace of DUs. Thus, analysis of the data reveals, through an Aalim's personal voice, issues of identity involving culture, religion, and community.

**Keywords:** Dar-ul-Uloom; Deoband; ulamaa; Muslim identity; interpretive phenomenological analysis



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## 1. Introduction

The term *Dar-ul-Uloom* (DU) can be translated as “house of knowledge” or “house of sciences.” It is often interchangeably used with the more generic term *Madrasah*. According to Sidat (2018), within the British Deobandi nomenclature, the DU refers to teaching institutions which focus on higher learning. DUs in Britain historically and geographically originate from the Indian subcontinent in Deoband, India, where the first DU was established in 1866 as a nonviolent resistance to the early British colonial rule (Ahmad et al. 2012; P. Lewis 2002; Metcalf 1982). During this period, the British introduced a new education system which was perceived as threatening Islamic orthodoxy and the identity of Muslims in India (Haddad and Balz 2008). As a result, the initial impetus for DU seminaries was to protect Islam from the cultural influences and educational hegemony of the British. The Deobandi institutions eventually expanded and spread globally. Its establishment in Britain began after World War Two when primary settlers from South Asia began to establish roots (D. Lewis 2011). Deobandis have now become the largest Islamic group in Britain, overseeing no less than 41% of the country's *Masjids* (mosques) (Muslims in Britain 2017). There are also now over 30 educational institutions in Britain that are linked to Deoband, serve as educators of Muslims in Britain, and subsequently produce the new generations of British *Ulamaa* (Islamic scholars) (Geaves 2012).

Educational provision in DUs and its *Ulamaa* however, have become a matter of concern to policy makers and the media, in recent years (Al-Alawi 2016; Geaves 2012; O. B.

Jones 2016; Taher 2019). Moreover, in the current geopolitical climate, the government's counterterrorism strategies for Britain's engagement with Muslims have raised questions of security and integration focused on DU education in Britain (Ali 2019). Although these seminaries and their graduates require comprehensive scholarly analysis, researchers have failed to gain access to DU institutions (Geaves 2007; Gilliat-Ray 2005) due to their status as 'outsiders'. There is also a gap in the literature which explores in depth the identities of *Ullamaa* who have graduated from DUs.

This paper reports on the first stage of data collection acquired for a PhD thesis. By virtue of one of the author's statuses as a DU graduate (*Aalim*), the author was able to gain intimate access to an *Aalim's* views and experiences to provide a unique and thorough analysis of his identity construction through an insider's perspective (Ryan et al. 2011). The research sought to provide a platform for this marginalised and often misrepresented group of the British community, and in this case, empower the participant to tell his own story of life in Britain, thus making a unique contribution to the study of Muslims in Britain. The study contributes to understanding the complex identities of British *Ullamaa* by providing initial nuanced insight into life in Britain for a DU graduate and explores, through an *Aalim's* self-narrative, how he constructs, navigates and negotiates aspects of his identity.

## 2. Literature Review

The Muslim community in Britain numbers approximately 3.5 million, or around 5.1% of the total British population (Muslim Census 2021). In recent years, although the fear of the 'other' (Daghigh and Rahim 2020) may be historically variable, it has been focused particularly on this minority community (Rahman 2020), and more specifically on second-generation Muslims (Hoque 2015; Seddon 2010; Shannahan 2011). Such Muslims have become the subject of questioning and intense debate since the Bradford riots (2001), Britain's wars in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003), and the 7/7 bombings in London (2005). The latter, in which British-born Muslims were said to have carried out attacks against their fellow citizens, brought Islam to the forefront of counter-terrorism policy (Alam and Husband 2013; Busher et al. 2019; Heath-Kelly 2013; O'Toole et al. 2016). Furthermore, these troubling events have formed public debates focused on contradictions, conflicts, and contrasting value systems (Berglund 2015; Singh and Cowden 2011), particularly vis-à-vis British values (Elton-Chalcraft et al. 2017; O'Toole 2019; Panjwani 2016).

One side of the debate maintains a concern for British Muslims being segregated and radicalised, which leads to disloyalty (Najib and Hopkins 2020; Peucker and Ceylan 2017). As a result, there are suggestions to increase surveillance and regulate this minority community (Britton 2019; Busher et al. 2019). Others (Abbas 2011; Kundnani 2015; Modood 2011) contend that Muslims in Britain have unjustly suffered from increasing intolerance and suspicion because of terrorist attacks committed by a small number of radicals who, essentially, marginalise and scapegoat Muslim communities (Berglund 2015; Dobbernack and Modood 2015; Najib and Hopkins 2020).

This discussion has deep and lasting visible impacts on almost every political, cultural, educational, economic, and social aspect of Britain. Cantle (2001, 2008) famously portrayed Muslims as self-segregated and intent on maintaining religious values which are supposedly in conflict with British values, despite there being no consensus about what are meant by British values (Farrell and Lander 2019; O'Toole 2019). As a result, the West, in particular Britain, has become increasingly interested in learning about the origin and propagation of these values (Kurzman and Ernst 2009; Suleiman and Shihadeh 2007). Such questions have focused the debate on Islamic schools, *Madrasahs*, and DUs (Hicham 2020); and their place within the British education system has come under intense scrutiny from government officials, the media, and the general public (Geaves 2012; Lahmar 2011; Thobani 2010). It is claimed that such institutions are to blame for fostering anti-Britishness by segregating their students and communities from the wider mainstream, leading to "parallel lives" (Cantle 2014; McAndrew and Sobolewska 2015). The Casey Review (Casey 2016) on integration and the Conservative government's Integrated Communities Strategy green paper (Ministry of

[Housing, Communities and Local Government 2018](#)) further exacerbated the issue, echoing the contention of former British Prime Minister, David Cameron, about the alleged ties between these seminaries and extremist organisations ([Malnick and Paton 2014](#)), whereas others claim that they promote Islamic extremism ([Al-Alawi 2016](#); [O. B. Jones 2016](#); [Taher 2019](#)).

Muslims, however, maintain that Islam is an inextinguishable part of their identity; Islamic seminaries are an essential part of their culture, and its education is unique ([Soni 2010](#)). They play a pivotal role within society by imparting religious education ([Ahmad et al. 2012](#)). They also add to the cultural heterogeneity of Britain, as they form an integral part of diverse British socio-ethnic traditions and values ([Ali 2019](#)). Claims about parallel lives and a lack of integration are unfounded as demonstrated by [Holmwood and Aitlhadj's \(2022\)](#) research which found that the integration of British Muslim communities was in fact, not problematic and there was no basis for regarding them with suspicion. This side of the debate maintains that there is an underlying conscious effort to try and foster the terrorist image of Islam and Islamic seminaries, as this suits the wider agenda of producing a version of Islam that is attuned to European policies and values ([Haddad and Balz 2008](#); [Halstead 2009](#); [Hicham 2020](#)). [Modood \(2013\)](#) asserts that such agendas are “being developed into an ideology in the context of a geo-political strategy to dominate Muslims” (p. 5). [Webber \(2022\)](#) in his report for the Institute of Race Relations revealed that the infamous ‘Clause 9’ (now Section 10) of the Nationality and Borders Act 2022, which extended government powers to strip people of their citizenship without prior notice, almost exclusively targets Muslims, mostly of South Asian heritage.

Similarly, the Trojan Horse affair in 2014, which played a major role in introducing and legitimising the Prevent Duty in 2015 ([Holmwood and O’Toole 2018](#)), and viewed as another example of security and integration policy aimed at increasing state regulation of Muslims, was found to reinforce negative stereotypes of Islam and Muslims ([Scott-Baumann et al. 2020](#)). Additionally, [Holmwood and Aitlhadj \(2022\)](#) who carried out the People’s Review of Prevent ultimately concluded that Prevent is “Islamophobic, discriminatory and relies on profiling which targets Muslim communities and poor communities disproportionately” (p. 5). Yet, despite these findings as well as the evidence which sparked the Trojan Horse controversy being discredited and exposed as a hoax ([Walker 2022](#)), the Prevent Duty continues to operate nationally with Islam as its implied focus ([Scott-Baumann et al. 2020](#)). [O’Toole et al. \(2016\)](#) describe these problematic and discriminatory state approaches to engaging Muslims as “a policy exchange of fears and beliefs across governance domains [which] entrench further a politics of unease about Muslims in British society” (p. 174). Furthermore, [Warsi](#) points out that Muslims are not a monolithic block, despite suffering from attacks and Islamophobia—which she terms anti-Muslim sentiment ([Warsi 2017](#), p. 271).

[Ingram \(2018\)](#) and [Birt \(2006\)](#), however, suggest that the roots of speculation surrounding DUs may be due to Deoband’s connections with the Taliban, with most operatives of the Taliban government in Afghanistan being educated in *Madrasahs*, in particular DUs. This has further polarised the debate on Islam and has essentially directed the focus towards these seminaries ([Hicham 2020](#); [Kashyap 2012](#); [Thobani 2010](#)). On the other hand, Edward [Said’s \(1997, 1993, 1978\)](#) seminal work demonstrated how the opinion of Islam has historically been discoloured based on speculation as opposed to facts. He concluded that knowledge of Islam is produced through the Orientalist bias of Western thinking and critiqued how the Western media covers Islam through misinformation, misconceptions, and misunderstandings.

Thus, the image of DUs, like most other representations of Islam, is constructed through the controversial way in which it is depicted in the media and public discourse ([Berglund 2015](#); [Kundnani 2015](#)). This leads to the (erroneous) generalisation that these seminaries foster extremism ([Al-Alawi 2016](#); [Dobbernack and Modood 2015](#); [O. B. Jones 2016](#); [Taher 2019](#)) and, as a result, a sensationalistic portrayal of Muslims, in particular DU graduates as potentially threatening radicals has emerged ([Ingram 2018](#); [Moj 2015](#); [Salam and Parvaiz 2020](#)).

With the current debate seemingly perpetuated by speculation reliant on investigative media coverage ([Muslim Council of Britain: Centre for Media Monitoring 2019](#)), it is evident that relatively little in-depth information is available about the vast majority of DUs and their graduates ([Gilliat-Ray 2005](#)). What happens in these institutions, and perhaps more significantly the graduates they produce, becomes important to understand in order to offer a counter narrative to the dominant misinformed discourse. The literature suggests there is a paucity of research which has documented the origins, curriculum, or culture of DUs, let alone attempted to understand its complex social and religious processes ([Ahmed 2012](#); [Gilliat-Ray 2006](#)). [Birt and Lewis \(2011\)](#) provide valuable insight into the first generation of British-educated *Ulamaa* and explore some of the social roles these *Ulamaa* began to assume when engaging with wider society, but these accounts focus on the professionalisation of the *Ulamaa* and not on the role DUs play in constructing their identities. [Sidat \(2018\)](#), using his insider privilege and status as a DU graduate, provides a detailed account of the religious training which occurs at a DU in the North West. However, although [Sidat's \(2018\)](#) detailed work provides useful insight into that particular DU, and in his words “captures the everyday lived reality inside a traditional *Dar al-Uloom*” (p. 3), there is a gap in the literature which documents how DU graduates construct and negotiate their religious and national identities to understand the lived reality DU students experience outside the DU after they graduate. As the leading academic on Deoband, Barbara Metcalf (cited in [Tayyib 2022](#)) suggests, “the need to understand Deoband and other Islamic movements in their own terms . . . continues to be of greater urgency in the plural, global world of today” (p. 23). Hence, the most valid research perspective may be through the lens and analyses of researchers who have access to this community and have been through and understand the DU system in context, such as an *Aalim*.

### 3. Methodology

This study utilised an interpretive phenomenological methodology with an emphasis on qualitative interviews. The epistemology employed in this study is intrinsically connected to the perception of identity construction and the theoretical emphasis which underpins it. It is informed by social constructionist theory, which views identities and identity construction as a form of meaning making by which individuals seek to make meaning of their social lives ([Savin-Baden and Howell-Major 2013](#)). The research examined the DU experience as a phenomenon in question through the participant's lens to gain insight of his perception of the phenomenon and understand how he makes sense of his identity in context. This is because the ontological assumptions of phenomenology rest in the intentionality of consciousness ([Creswell and Poth 2018](#)); in other words, reality is only perceived within the meaning of the experience of an individual. Phenomenology, therefore, focuses on the subjective experiences of individuals and attempts to unveil the world as experienced by them through their life stories. This requires a rich description of individual narratives; however, phenomenology is not only about description. As [van Manen \(1990\)](#) suggested, it is also an interpretive process in which the researcher interprets through mediation different meanings of the lived experience. [Sarup \(1996\)](#) suggested that individuals construct their identity at the same time as they tell their life story, which indicates that there is also a close relationship between the self and the narrative.

#### 3.1. Research Design

The research explores the complex notion of identity and, more specifically, to what extent DU education influences perspectives in constructing identities framed within the context of the participant's self-narrative. Concepts of identity construction involve complex social processes shaped by individual beliefs, attitudes, and experiences. Thus, the need for rich description to communicate the context within which the process of identity formation takes place, and the goal of understanding the participant's story from his own frame of reference, were best achieved with qualitative research methods ([Wolcott 1994](#)). This also corresponds to the interpretive philosophical perspective that meaning is subjective and



highly individualised (Bansal and Corley 2011; Creswell 2005) and individual subjective meanings and purposes which direct human behaviour, such as consciousness, thoughts, feelings, meanings, intentions, and ideas, cannot be objectified nor quantified (Denzin and Lincoln 1998; Schwandt 2000). Therefore, the authors closely examined the participant's DU experiences, relying on his personal perceptions and accounts of those experiences as opposed to seeking an objective statement or account of the DU experience.

As the aim of the research was to provide a thick description (Geertz 1973) of how DU experiences affected the participant's identity construction with consideration of the embedded social meanings of the community, a research design which enabled the establishment of a rapport between the researcher and the participant was necessary. Furthermore, in a qualitative phenomenological research study, description and interpretation of the process of identity formation are only possible in context, and any effort to share what is learned from the participants requires an awareness of the context (Merriam 2009). It was, therefore, important for the researcher responsible for data collection to not only be aware of, but familiar with the context of the research which includes the values that govern the actions of the DU community. This involved understanding the historical and, more significantly, religious contexts and educational practices of DUs. The researcher's role was to translate and describe how the participant narrates the DU's impact in shaping his identity as a British *Aalim*. This was only possible through the lead author's role as a self-aware translator, able to translate and make sense of the participant's narrative (Smith and Osborn 2015).

### 3.2. Positionality

The proclivity of researchers in the first half of the twentieth century to investigate the unfamiliar often stigmatised the researcher as an outsider. This inevitably led to problems of access, intrusiveness, familiarity, and rapport between the researcher and the researched community (Mercer 2007). In the second half of the twentieth century, however, researchers developed a new approach in the systematic studies of the familiar in terms of culture, gender, religion, and ethnic backgrounds (Hockey 1993). This approach maintained the idea that researchers who possess the same values as their participants have privileged access to certain kinds of knowledge (Merton 1972). Griffith (1998) suggested that the insider "shares a lived familiarity with the group being researched, whereas the outsider is a researcher who does not have any intimate knowledge of the group being researched, prior to entry into the group" (p. 361).

However, negotiating trust, establishing rapport, and perhaps, more significantly, overcoming suspicion despite shared familiarities could also be a barrier to access participants. It was, therefore, important to consider the current geopolitical climate in which this research was undertaken. Busher et al. (2019) and Ragazzi (2016) highlighted that, in recent years, Muslim communities had in many ways taken on the status of a suspect community. As a result, Bolognani (2007) writes that the rise of Islamophobia has "created a general sense of mistrust towards people investigating issues concerning Muslims in Britain" (p. 281). Thus, the 'insider' identity of the lead researcher, who was not only a member of the community under study, but also a graduate of a DU, having studied in three different institutions in England, played a significant role in gaining intimate access, negotiating trust, and overcoming suspicion.

The insider's perspective also addressed the gap in the literature by providing a nuanced account of the complex and often contentious debates associated with DUs and their graduates by taking into consideration the religious, social, cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and theological values shared by the researcher and the participant, thus adding to the study's originality and uniqueness. Furthermore, the study demonstrated how, as a graduate of a DU, the author was well positioned to understand the participant's complex religious, social, cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and theological values, which were highly significant for capturing rich and authentic data. The author's insights and experiences further helped inform the research and consequently enriched the data.

Nonetheless, it is still important to acknowledge that the insider/outsider complex is far more than just a dichotomy (Crossley et al. 2016) but more of a continuum. It was important for the author to locate himself within the research in relation to the participant by not only identifying and acknowledging the similarities between himself and the participant, but to also acknowledge the differences. Essentially, the author was positioned as both an insider and outsider (Miller and Glassner 2004). For example, although the author shared the same religion, gender, language, and, to a certain extent, educational background with the participant, it was important to note that their culture, age, generation, experiences, class, status, and position were different. Thus, whilst the similarities were advantageous, the author needed to consider how he would negotiate the differences through the process of reflexivity throughout the research. Thus, the author's positionality as a researcher in relation to the differences between himself and the participant were a constant point of reference to enable the author to carefully consider and reflect on his position and influence during the study.

Within the context of this study, the data collection author's attitudes, values, and worldview certainly informed his interpretation of what the participant said (Temple 1999), but this was considered useful as he is a member of, and represents, that community. His commonality and familiarity with the participant's world supported the understanding of many of the specific cultural and localised nuances (Bhopal 2000). These conceptions were not only required, but essential to make sense of the participant's personal world through the process of interpretive activity (Smith and Osborn 2015).

#### 4. Data Collection

This paper reports on data and analysis from three one-hour interviews with a participant who graduated from a DU in England, UK after 2005. Using the lead author's access to *Ulamaa*, information about the research was disseminated to over 400 *Ulamaa* through social media applications. The first six respondents who met the criteria for the research were then selected for interviews. Some of these interviews remain ongoing and this paper reports on the data acquired from the first complete set of interviews with one of the participants. A single case study in this context, however, is justified within the confines of a phenomenological research approach, whose purpose is to capture rich, in-depth, and detailed accounts from participants, and it is not unusual to have single participant case studies (Wheatley 2019). Nonetheless, to widen the scope of the research and capture a broader yet authentic view of DU experiences, in an ongoing study, the author has recruited participants who have studied in major DUs across the UK, such as Birmingham, Blackburn, Bury, Dewsbury, Kidderminster, and London (not reported on here).

Data for this study were collected through three one-hour semi-structured interviews with the participant. The semi-structured approach, in which the interviewer and participant shared control of the interview (Sharp 2009), enabled the author to gain valuable insight into the complex behaviours of the DU graduate, taking into account religious, cultural, and social nuances. The shared power dimension embedded in semi-structured interviews also allowed the participant to remain comfortable whilst expressing his views, and produced authentic and honest data (L. Davies 1985; Jayaratne and Stewart 1995).

After ethical approval was gained from the University of Cumbria, the three interviews were conducted with the voluntary participant, between October and November 2020. The first interview took place in a *Masjid* which was negotiated with the participant as a safe and neutral space. Due to the subsequent Covid lockdown, the second and third interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams. All three interviews were audio recorded with the informed consent of the participant. The audio recordings were then manually transcribed verbatim with the assistance of voice recognition software. Following transcription, the participant was given the opportunity to read through, reflect and validate the transcript for accuracy adding further authenticity to the research. This is known as "respondent validation" (Reason et al. 1981), where the researcher presents drafts of interview data

to prevent misquotation and misrepresentation ensuring that the data are authentic and accurate.

### 5. The Interview and Reflexivity

The process of gathering data through the interview involved social interactions with the participant both online and face-to-face. Considerations of reflexivity, therefore, played a significant role throughout the research process. England (1994) defined reflexivity as a self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious analytical scrutiny of the self within the research which induces self-discovery. By engaging in this process throughout the research as well as afterwards, the authors were able to identify particular strengths and weaknesses of the research which will inform future fieldwork.

The two most significant aspects of conducting the interviews related to the author's personal experience of studying in and graduating from a DU. The reflective process highlighted that his shared experiences with the participant were useful in understanding and interpreting the participant's narratives; however, they could also be a potential interference. During transcription, listening to the recordings allowed the author to distance himself from the interview and although extremely time-consuming, it played a crucial role in his objectivity. Nonetheless, the author's personal experiences and interests and recognising when to suspend and utilise them were still a significant challenge in this study. Familiarity with the participant as well as the participant's familiarity with the author enabled the forming of a close and trusting relationship. This was useful in creating a comfortable and relaxed environment which was clearly evident through the rich data gathered from the interview.

Moreover, the rapport was further enhanced by the author's and the participant's shared language competencies. The author's language repertoire played a major role in navigating through and, more importantly, understanding the participant's story. Throughout the interview, the researcher and participant used translanguaging (Hassan and Ahmed 2015) as a tool to communicate; the conversation frequently switched between English, Arabic, Urdu, and Sylheti whilst integrating them within a single linguistic system (García and Wei 2014). Additionally, the shared understanding between the researcher and the participant of familiar concepts and language competences facilitated a fluid interview process without the need to pause for clarification.

### 6. Findings and Analysis

Following transcription, Smith et al.'s (2022) IPA framework for analysis was employed to analyse the data. This process began with multiple readings of the transcripts to capture a holistic account of the participant's narrative. Exploratory noting and free coding were then undertaken to make unfocussed notes about the participant's responses. Experiential statements also known as phenomenological coding (Larkin and Thompson 2012) were then constructed by carrying out a line-by-line analysis of the transcripts. Conceptual themes and patterns which captured the core essence of the participant's narrative were then identified by searching for connections across the experiential statements. These conceptual themes, referred to by Smith et al. (2022) as personal experiential themes, were then clustered and consolidated under superordinate conceptual headings which, in the case of this participant's narrative, were culture, religion, and community. Furthermore, transcripts were continuously referred to throughout the analysis to ensure the emergent themes authentically captured and reflected the participant's narrative. This iterative process, required for interpreting individual experiences also involved "cycling and recycling" (Larkin and Thompson 2012, p. 105) between the various steps outlined by Smith et al. (2022), whilst examining the data collection author's reflexivity (as mentioned earlier). In addition, the data collection author worked with the second author during analysis and theory construction in considering issues of validity, thus ensuring the data were appropriately represented, thereby capturing a detailed examination of the participant's identity as an *Aalim*.



Our analysis of the participant's interviews, however, resisted problematising the presence, identities, and loyalties of DU *Ulamaa* and instead focussed on providing a nuanced and intimate understanding of a member of this community. Nonetheless, we must also acknowledge here, that this partial account of one *Aalim's* narrative inevitably has limitations. The purpose of this study was not to provide a comprehensive account of the participant's narrative, nor was it intended to serve as a representative analysis of all *Ulamaa* in Britain. Rather, it was a first step in overcoming barriers to access a community somewhat shrouded in mystery as a result of which they are targeted, marginalised and misrepresented. Furthermore, due to the richness of the data gathered through the three one-hour interviews, our conversations were much too lengthy to include in their entirety. Therefore, conscious decisions were made about which themes, quotations and parts of the participant's narrative were included. The paper does not provide a full account of the participant's narrative but interpretations and reflections about particular themes related to the participant's identity construction and negotiation. Therefore, the conclusions that are drawn are only relative to the participant's reality of his identity and our interpretations of that reality. His narrative suggests that the place of *Ulamaa* in Britain is complex, multidimensional, and, worryingly, unsettling. But this is not due to the well-known documented reasons purported in most mainstream media and political discourse, rather there are underlying factors within local communities which we begin to explore here.

Maulana Sulaiman, pseudonym, (MS) was born in London, however he initially enrolled at a DU in Bangladesh as a boarding student to complete his *Hifz* (memorisation of the *Qur'aan*) at the age of nine. He completed his *Hifz* in 2004 and then began his Islamic Studies education at primary level whilst still in Bangladesh. In 2009, MS chose to return to England and enrol at a DU in Dewsbury. He completed his Islamic Studies there in 2014 earning a degree equivalent qualification in Arabic and Islamic Studies. In line with the traditional South Asian custom of DUs, he also gained the status of an *Aalim* and the title, '*Maulana*'. After graduating, MS began teaching part time at an Islamic secondary school during the day and in a *Maktab* (supplementary Islamic school) in the evenings. During his time at the secondary school, he was tasked with teaching Islamic Art and developed a passion to study the subject further. He then completed an MA in Traditional Arts at the Prince's Foundation in 2019. Still in his mid-twenties, MS describes himself as a scholar of Islam, a happily married man, and a father of two children. Reflecting on his identity as an *Aalim*, MS stated:

"Well, my identity is an *Aalim*, so if I was to say that, you know, the person who I am today is because I'm an *Aalim* I won't be lying. I think, everything positive about my character, about my . . . the way I approach people, about my professionalism, is because I'm an *Aalim*. So, for my self-development, I think it [referring to his DU education] was excellent. It was, I think . . . the best thing that happened to me."

Data from the interview revealed through MS's personal voice, some of the wider concepts concerning issues of identity, such as culture, religion, and community, that he considered important contributors to his complex and multifaceted identity as a DU *Aalim*. He highlights the significance of Islam and its importance in negotiating his faith and place in Britain. For MS, his religious identity and spiritual nourishment acquired through his DU journey were the primary markers of his identity which clearly distinguishes his experience from that of non-DU *Ulamaa* and other British Muslims. However, it was also identified that, along with his religious identity, there were several overlapping factors between his DU identity, culture, and community.

### 6.1. Identity Construction

Throughout the interviews, MS highlighted the impact his local community had in shaping his identity. His own motivation to become an *Aalim* was driven by a personal commitment and desire to serve and lead his community. However, conflicting views of what it means to be an *Aalim* made the relationship between him and his community

complex. MS considered his community to have constructed a super-orthodox perception of DU *Ulamaa*, which contradicted his own view of what it means to be an *Aalim*. His community's perception was one that reflected a rigid monastic image of *Ulamaa*, whereas MS presented a more fluid view of his position and status as an *Aalim*. These contradicting views of what an *Aalim* is and should be, seemed to have created intercommunity disparities between MS and his community.

Significantly, however, the community to which MS referred to was not homogenised and monolithic, but complex and multi-layered. These layers were identified and categorised by MS as the inner community which included his friends, family and peers; the outer community which included his congregations and his employers and; the wider community which referred to the wider Muslim and non-Muslim British public with whom he did not have any direct interactions. Although he felt variable levels of disparities existed within all layers, according to MS, the most significant layer influencing his identity was the outer layer which, he felt, possessed a culturally influenced perception of DU *Ulamaa*, which contradicted his perception. An example MS provides for this is the issue of wearing headphones:

"One of the biggest things I experienced [referring to misunderstandings about *Ulamaa*] ... I know for a fact if I wasn't a DU student, no one would point a finger at me. The fact that I wear headphones instead of earphones ... I wear it because it keeps my ears warm (laughs), but people would point fingers like, it doesn't suit you to be wearing headphones, because ... and I was like because what? I mean why? Why? Why can anyone else wear headphones and I have to wear earphones ... that was one of them. Also, I think we're expected to wear a certain type of clothing. The clothes play a big role in our community, it's like if we're wearing the clothes of you know ... the way we do dress, with long *thobes* [traditional Muslim gown] all the way up to above our ankles and you got a hat on our head, then we're wearing clothes appropriately. Whereas if we just normally go out with anything casual, then it's as if we've done the worst thing in the world."

When probed about the issue further and asked about his own experiences with clothing, he stated:

"Although I do believe that you [referring to Islamic scholars] don't have to wear a *thobe* to be wearing the *Sunnah libaas* [Islamic dress code], as long as you're covered, your clothes are above the ankle and, you know ... that's completely fine. Me, I think it's a personal thing with me. I'm just comfortable with what I wear [referring to the traditional Muslim gown] so I wouldn't go out wearing anything else because I'm just generally, not comfortable with it. But I mean even my own brothers [who are also *Aalims*], they wear different things at different times and it's completely normal. I've seen amongst my friends as well, when we would go out to eat or we would go out to the shops or something like that and, whoever's wearing long clothes ... this is the funny thing, in our community, if you're wearing long clothes, long dress, a *thobe* and everything, you'll be treated with respect and the other person, will be treated as okay, you're just the guy with him."

MS's experiences revealed that his community made a distinction between the use of earphones and headphones. Earphones were considered to be an acceptable device for an *Aalim* to wear due to their multifunctionality, but headphones were not because, within his community headphones were perceived to be a device used exclusively to listen to music (an act which is considered forbidden by many Muslims (Otterbeck 2008, 2014; Otterbeck and Ackfeldt 2012)). Although MS does not listen to music, this socio-cultural construct of headphones meant that he had to navigate his way through the assumptions of listening to music that were projected onto him. His frustration at dealing with these socio-cultural

constructs were clearly evident in his response through repetition, asking “Why? Why? Why can anyone else wear headphones and I have to wear earphones?”

Furthermore, MS’s experience with clothing demonstrates that despite choosing to wear the traditional DU attire and considering it an important identity marker of his DU identity, he maintained that it was not necessary to do so. On the other hand, these experiences made him feel that the outer community imposed a particular dress code on DU *Ulamaa* for them to be recognised as a genuine *Aalim*. On the other hand, he maintained that although most *Ulamaa* who have studied in DUs are considered to be genuine within their communities and, to an extent, a source of pride within their inner and outer communities, the stability of this perception particularly for the outer community, often depends on the *Aalim*’s ability to successfully maintain and fulfil high and arguably, unrealistic expectations as evidenced by the examples of wearing headphones and adhering to a particular dress code. Failure to fulfil these expectations can lead to a rapid shift in perception placing *Ulamaa* like MS, as outsiders, marginalised and segmented within their own community.

This was certainly the case in MS’s narrative; he perceived such views as a barrier to fitting in within his own community suggesting a lack of belonging. From a young age, he was aware of the stigma associated with enrolling at DU but was also conscious of the high expectations that would follow. When describing his views on how DU *Ulamaa* were perceived by the outer community, he believed they were viewed as “black sheep” “scapegoats,” and with “no other use” than to study in DUs as a last resort in comparison to studying Western disciplines. He stated:

“In our communities . . . we’re the black sheep, I’d say the scapegoats. Some people in the community, I might say the vast majority even, have this kind of thought, that if he’s gone to DU, that means (laughs) his family had no other use for him. He won’t be a doctor, he won’t be an engineer, he won’t be anything that will make any difference to the community, let’s just send him to DU . . . that’s the family’s last resort kind of thing. If nothing [else] he’ll probably help us in the hereafter . . . that’s our golden ticket. The rest [those who pursue secular education] you know, they have to be successful, they’re going to have their own houses, they’re going to get married, and you know have successful lives.”

At the same time, he recalls and contrasts the negative labels ascribed to DU students with the high expectations held by the same members of that community:

“The community has extremely high expectations and extremely high hopes, I remember specifically when I was here on holiday and my brother mentioned that . . . the chairperson of my local mosque wanted me to lead *Salaah* (daily Muslim prayers) as much as possible, because he thought that as long as you’re studying, you’re on the right path. I remember, when I came back from Bangladesh and before I was going Dewsbury there was about a 5–6-month gap, I would constantly go to the mosque, pray there and everything and I remember the community . . . they had such high expectations and such high hopes, that you know, this is a graduate of our locality, he will one day spiritually lead us . . . they have quite high expectations, high hopes and I think they treated me like that as well.”

This revealed that MS was very aware of the outer community’s changing perception of him and described it as “something he was used to”. On the other hand, he strongly expressed his disagreement with their views and was confidently aware of his own profile and status as a DU *Aalim*. MS did, however, feel that these perceptions influenced his identity as an *Aalim*. He felt that identity was shaped by one’s self-perception which dictates outward behaviour, and that outward behaviour is judged by the community, which is then embodied into one’s self-perception. In other words, his DU identity, in part, was often unconsciously dictated and influenced by the changing expectations and perceptions of the outer community and the role he had within it. When asked about whether he felt his identity as an *Aalim* had changed over time, he commented:

“Yeah, that has changed dramatically I would say, I mean once you leave *Madrasah* . . . you have certain mind sets that, you know, you would go out into the community, you would do this, you would lead them, but that changes over time. I think you start to identify yourself on your current situation and place in the community, rather than your expectations.”

This suggests that MS, to an extent, embraced the nature of his community’s changing perceptions and expectations, and that they were time specific and dependant on phases of the DU journey. During the initial stages of his DU education, MS was met with low expectations and pejorative labelling, however, as he progressed through his studies, and reached the stage of competently leading prayers (before graduating), he became acutely aware of the now higher expectations placed on him, although these expectations were positive. These higher expectations then began to grow into what MS described as ‘unrealistic’ expectations after graduating. The ‘unrealistic’ expectations were directed at the DU ‘*Aalim*’, not the DU student thus separating the essence of the DU experience from its outcome i.e., the *Aalim*. The dissonance between MS’s perception of an *Aalim* and his community’s may arise from this subtle distinction between the DU experience and the DU *Aalim*. Whereas MS views his identity as an *Aalim* and his DU experience as integrated, the community’s perception (and therefore expectations) make a distinction between the *Aalim* and the DU experience suggesting a lack of awareness and nuanced understanding of *Ulamaa* in society. Highlighting this, throughout the interview, MS made clear distinctions between the *Aalim* and the *Imaam* (Muslim religious leader) which he suggested were often conflated by his community. He referred to being an *Aalim* as a personal issue stating:

“Being an *Aalim* is a personal thing because what you’ve learned in DU is literally the way of life according to the *Qur’aan* and the sayings and doings of the Prophet (s.a.w), nothing more, nothing less.”

In relation to the *Imaam*, he went on to state:

“Now, amongst all those things in ‘way of life’, you have business, you have family, you have economics, you have farming, you have hygiene. Also, you have leadership [referring to the role of the *Imaam*] and I think that’s what, that’s one of the only aspects that the outside community sees from you . . . it’s [the] only one that we’re judged by, or there’s only one that we’re expected to do.”

For MS, there was a clear distinction between the *Aalim* and the *Imaam*. Being an *Aalim* for him, was a personal issue and a way of life, whereas the *Imaam* was considered to be a profession or an occupation. *Imaams* i.e., religious leaders of communities, can be understood as public servants and are therefore, often subjected to high standards, high expectations and at times, blatant criticism. Although the two statuses overlap, MS highlighted that not every *Aalim* was an *Imaam* and that the lack of awareness and distinction between the two in society meant that many *Ulamaa* were, at times, left grappling with an identity they may not have embraced. MS, however, was required to navigate through this sensitive yet challenging trajectory which clearly impacted his identity; from having “no other use” to being expected to become a spiritual and religious leader, to having to embrace an identity that was, to an extent, imposed on him. This, along with his view that perceptions of *Ulamaa* and the (unfair) standards that they are held against, are fuelled by a lack of awareness and, more significantly, social misunderstandings, created a dissonance between him and his community, which in turn, played an important role in his identity construction.

## 6.2. Navigating and Negotiating Conflict

Contrary to the literature (Al-Alawi 2016; Cantle 2014; Casey 2016; HM Government 2018; O. B. Jones 2016; Taher 2019), MS did not feel a significant tension between his DU identity and his British identity. He constantly reinforced the idea that his identity as a DU *Aalim* did not contradict his British identity, insisting that they were compatible. He considered his DU identity and his Britishness well integrated; even referring to himself

as a 'British *Maulana*'. Whilst there were notable incidents of perceived tensions between his religious and national identity, the issue of navigating and negotiating his DU identity with his British identity appeared to be less complex and seemed to have been overcome through open dialogue and the forming of mutual understandings, tolerance, and respect. For example, when asked about the issue of shaking hands with the opposite gender, he responded:

"I mean everyone has their different views about it, but I think as long as there's no physical contact it, it's necessary because the information [the message of Islam] still has to go to everyone, cause I remember very specifically one of my teachers, they visited the construction site of a new mosque and in charge of the construction was a lady and what she did was, she extended her hand for a handshake, and he didn't do it, but at the end he, he definitely had to give them an explanation of why he didn't do it. Obviously [due to] Islamic values, he didn't do it, but at the end he said, he made it clear that the reason why I didn't shake your hand is out of respect, because I believe you're so valuable that the only people that can touch you is [are] your husband, your father, your son, you know it's out of respect it's not out of, because we put woman in a lower space and it turned out that she was very respectful of that view."

He maintained a tolerant view of others who differed with his views and lifestyle and did not distinguish between British values and Islamic values but viewed them holistically. This was another theme which emerged during the analysis; indeed, the concept of an "us" vs. "them" mentality did not exist for MS, nor did a separation of values and customs. For example, when addressing types of knowledge, MS did not view his DU education as separate or distinct from secular Western education but viewed both as an integrated body of knowledge. When asked about his decision to pursue a Master's degree in Islamic art from a Western university instead of completing advanced studies at an Islamic institute he stated:

"I think understanding the question you just said plays a huge part because if you say *takhassus fil hadeeth* [advanced studies in Prophetic traditions], and I say a Masters in Art, it sounds completely different whereas I can just say I just did *takhassus fil fann* [advanced studies in art] or someone might say that you did a Masters or you did a PhD in Prophetic traditions. So, I don't think they're different, I don't think doing a *takhassus* [advanced study] is different than doing a Masters. The environment might be different, but knowledge is all the same . . . I understood any type of further knowledge as an enhancement to whatever I'm learning, whatever I did learn in DU is, the only difference is one would be in a DU environment and one wouldn't, but enhancement of the knowledge that I've learnt, is all the same."

He confidently maintained that it is not Islam that is incompatible with British values, rather the perceived contradictions between DU orthodoxy and British values were conflated with cultural resistances emanating from Britain's colonial legacy in India that were contradictory. He also considered DU teachings to be compatible with British values and not contradictory. When questioned about the perceived conflict between DU orthodoxy and British values, he explained:

"So, what I'm trying to kind of say is that the majority of the perceived conflict between being an *Aalim* or the religious, orthodox religious beliefs and values and British society or British values, they're kind of embedded in culture and not within our beliefs . . . I don't know if this will explain it more, so Islam's religion was not designed for a specific people, it was for anyone and everyone, from any time or space . . . I'm just going to go into a slightly deeper discussion, here. For example, when Islam came to Turkey, when it came to Egypt, when it came to Morocco, it kind of embraced the culture there, and that's why you have Moroccan Muslims, Egyptian Muslims, Turkish Muslims, and they all have their



... you can identify them by the way they dress, by the way they, they read the *Qur'aan* ... their accent is slightly different. With Islam in Britain, what happened was we didn't, it [was] not just Islam [that] came over to this country, the entire Indian culture came with it. That's why the majority of Muslims in this country are from the Indian subcontinent and where, I think, we're looked at as Muslims and also as Indians. Whereas, if Islam was to spread in this country to the number that we have today through someone like Abdullah Quilliam, it would have been completely different. He used to wear furs, he used to wear a long trench coat, it would have been a bit more different, and we would have seen being an *Aalim* is not at all contradictory to British values much faster. So, the orthodox beliefs that are, you know, established in DUs, they're not contradictory to British values. What's actually contradictory to British values and British society is the culture that came with the Indian scholars that came and propagated the religion [referring to the culture imported by non-*Ulamaa* when learning about Islam from *Ulamaa*] but that contradiction that even happened through culture, that wasn't intentional. It kind of was the vibe at that time because of the entire situation of the segregation, the war between Bangladesh and Pakistan, everything that happened because of the East Indian trading company ... it goes a bit deeper than that, but I, I think you know what I mean".

This passage from the interview demonstrates MS's belief in the universality of Islam and that the essence of Islam is not contradictory to a people, time, place, or culture. Therefore, Islam is perceived as compatible with all cultures and, more specifically, it is not separate or distinct from one's nationality (i.e., being British). The perceived conflicts, in fact, stem from clashes between national identities and cultures, and, in this case, it was the South Asian culture (conflated with Islam) that was understood to be contradictory to British values. What is important to note, however, is that the culture was not brought by the *Ulamaa*, it was imported by the non-*Ulamaa*, perhaps unintentionally, as a result of pan-ethnic nationalities and the aftermath of colonialism. Conflicts and resistance were therefore identified as not religious, but cultural.

## 7. Conclusions

The aim of this study was to address the gap in literature in relation to the study of *Ulamaa* in Britain and facilitate giving voice to a marginalised and often misrepresented group of the British Muslim community. Because of the identity of the data collection author as an *Aalim*, the study was able to provide a platform to a member of the DU community and empower him to tell his own story of life in Britain in order to begin to understand the identity of British *Ulamaa* from their own frame of reference. The study contributes to understanding the complex identities of British *Ulamaa* by providing initial nuanced insight into life in Britain for a DU graduate and examined, through his self-narrative, how he constructs, navigates and negotiates aspects of his identity.

As with all identities, the identity of this DU graduate is clearly shaped by the concept of self and external attributions. The participant's narrative draws attention to how DU *Ulamaa* are often misrepresented and misunderstood due to ethnic, sociocultural, and religious discrimination. A significant finding of this study was that the participant's DU identity was not only misrepresented and misunderstood within mainstream media and public discourse, but also within his own community. His identity was not characterised by a crisis between his orthodox DU values and Britishness, but by a number of factors tied to misrepresentation within the wider British public and misconceptions within his own community. Through cultural stereotypes, marginalisation within his community, and the wider misrepresentations of Muslims in general, the participant suggests his identity was consistently impacted in a negative way. For example, the participant reveals that conflicting views of what it personally means to be an *Aalim* and his community's perception of an *Aalim* make the relationship between him and his community complex. The lens through which he is viewed by the community he serves has a socio-cultural impact;

the consequences of which, he felt, led to intercommunity disparities. The participant posits how negative public perception of his identity as an *Aalim*, especially of those within his own community, has both personal and social consequences. The findings suggest that the participant's identity is characterised by a dissonance between his personal and social identities. He maintained that although his primary identity markers were constructed through the religious and spiritual nourishment acquired in DU, and that he was confident and comfortable with this identity, the social identity imposed on him by others create feelings of unease.

In relation to navigating and negotiating DU orthodoxy with British values, it is evident that the establishment of DU Deoband in India and its history with British colonialism, together with the government's failed attempts to engage with Muslims in Britain meaningfully and indiscriminately, make the politics of identity for DU *Ulamaa* complex as it unfairly pits their DU allegiances against their loyalties to Britain. The findings suggest that the participant's DU identity and his British identity were complex and multi-layered and could not be explained by an oversimplified conflict between 'Britishness' and DU orthodoxy. Instead, his DU identity needed to be understood beyond the 'British-Muslim binary'. Binary categorisations of DU values and British values seemed to obscure the nuanced reality of his identity. Furthermore, divisive politics, fuelled by counter terrorism, security and integration policies, seem only to fabricate a polarisation of the participant's DU identity and national identity. This highlights the importance of understanding this minority group through their own voices. Providing a platform for *Ulamaa* will enable them to take ownership and control of their narrative and counter the neglect amplified by the dominant misinformed discourse surrounding their presence in modern-day Britain.

Finally, using the participant's self-narrative, this study has highlighted the usefulness of exploring the individual and social dimensions of an *Aalim's* identity. These aspects remain severely under-explored with respect to DU *Ulamaa*, even though *Ulamaa* are a major part of the social fabric of Britain as spiritual and religious leaders of their communities. Our research, so far, has examined the individual identity construction of an *Aalim* and highlighted the complex nature of researching these communities. Most importantly however, the study reveals that researching and understanding the identity of *Ulamaa* requires a sensitivity to shared values and familiarity with the community which can perhaps only be achieved effectively through insider positionality. Our research suggests that there is much more nuance to understanding the identities of DU *Ulamaa* in Britain. Reflexive engagement throughout the research process, however, is integral to researching communities in which positionality not only provides access to the researched group but plays a major role in locating and understanding the terms of reference from which they tell their stories. A sustained research focus on the identity of a group unjustly associated with controversies, whilst one is a part of that community itself, is challenging as it involves continuous reflexive examination of not only the controversial aspects associated with the group, but the sensitivities of researching a group who are considered hard to reach, orthodox in their beliefs and values, and cautious of researchers as a result of stigmatisation and surveillance.

Future work will draw on the narratives of other DU *Ulamaa* who have studied in different parts of the country to explore how they construct their identities and how they negotiate perceived conflicts not only with the wider British mainstream, but within their own communities. By gaining unprecedented access to intimately explore the lives and identities of DU *Ulamaa* in Britain, our work will explore the identities of *Ulamaa* in a collective context, filling the gap in literature about the study of DU *Ulamaa* in Britain.

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