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# Rotherham, Rochdale, and the Racialised Threat of the 'Muslim Grooming Gang'

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### Abstract

For over a decade, British Muslims have been at the forefront of political, media and societal concerns in regards to terrorism, radicalisation, women's rights, segregation and, most recently, the sexual exploitation and abuse of young women. Demonised, marginalised and criminalised due to inflammatory political rhetoric, inaccurate, irresponsible and sensationalist media reporting, discriminatory counter terrorism policies and legislation and state surveillance, British Muslims have emerged as a perceived racialised threat. This has continued apace with the onset of the Rochdale and Rotherham 'grooming' child sexual abuse scandals which in popular discourse have been dominated by representations focusing on race, ethnicity and the dangerous masculinities of Muslim men. This disproportionate and racist narrative served to both *frame* and *limit* the debate relating to the sexual exploitation and violence experienced by young female victims at a pivotal moment when the issue had been brought to national attention. This article compares and contrasts the representations and discourse of racialised and non-racialised reporting of child sexual abuse and situates the 'grooming' scandals in the context of anti-Muslim racism. It argues that the development of the British Muslim as a racialised threat is a current and on-going legacy of colonialism in which this group experiences discriminatory 'othering' processes resulting in their marginalisation.

### Keywords

Anti-Muslim; racism; racialisation; grooming; othering.

### Introduction

The history of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism within the UK (and further afield) was established long before 2001 (Poynting and Mason 2007), yet in recent years these forms of racism have, arguably, significantly intensified. This period has been punctuated by the specific targeting of young British Muslims through state surveillance, such as in the form of divisive and discriminatory government-funded 'counter terrorism' initiatives (Kundnani 2014); by far right nationalist groups marching through and attacking areas with large Muslim populations (Johnston and Kavanagh 2013); and by violently racist anti-Muslim attacks resulting in the killing of British citizens (Greatrex 2013). These examples are not unique and are compounded

by recent episodes of racialised panic generated by lurid headlines of 'Islamic takeovers' within secondary schools and by reports of British Muslims attempting to reach conflict zones in Syria and Iraq.

Recent high profile news stories relating to sexual abuse occurring within the towns of Rotherham in South Yorkshire and Rochdale in Greater Manchester have led to a number of significant consequences, including the publication of independent reports highlighting individual and institutional failures. The most high profile of these, a report by Professor Alexis Jay (2014) examining the child abuse that took place in Rotherham, caused a sensation in the media and resulted in widespread condemnation of the local council, police and social services. A prominent feature in the media and political discourse that followed, however, was that these events could be examined through a lens of race and ethnicity. In particular, attention swiftly turned to the events and their causes being attributed, variously, to 'Muslim', 'Asian' and 'Pakistani' communities. This current article is concerned with addressing the reporting and fallout from the events in Rotherham and from the earlier events in Rochdale. Specifically, it argues that the representation of the events that took place in Rotherham and Rochdale and the subsequent impact this had, vary markedly from other instances where the sexual abuse of women and young girls has been reported. It suggests that, through the lens of a postcolonial context in which the Muslim male is recognised in myriad ways as an inherently dangerous and racialised threat, we can begin to make sense of the intense scrutiny of the behaviour and actions of the British Muslim community. Moreover, and with reference to empirical data, I suggest that negative portrayals of Muslims further alienate and criminalise this community, one already facing discriminatory counter-terrorism policies and legislation, state surveillance, disproportionate policing and consistent demands to integrate.

## Methods

The empirical data presented in this article were gathered from a number of semi-structured interviews with second generation British Muslims and from a critical discourse analysis of media sources and official reports relating to the Rochdale and Rotherham child sexual exploitation scandals. The semi-structured interviews referenced here were conducted with second generation British Muslims, beginning in January 2013; this data collection is a continuing process at time of writing. The initial intention of the study was to examine British Muslims' views of integration and belonging but it quickly became apparent that the emerging 'grooming' scandal in Rochdale was a topic of key concern for nearly all of the interview respondents. This is likely due to the fact that all interviews were conducted within Greater Manchester; Rochdale is a large town located within this conurbation. The critical discourse analysis of media sources and official reports examined coverage relating to the Rochdale and Rotherham child abuse scandal and to other child abuse scandals that received markedly less attention. The time period examined was between 2010 and 2014. Whilst it is clear that Muslim ethnic groups in other parts of the globe have been racialised as violent sexual deviants (see Grewal 2012; Ticktin 2008), this article focuses predominantly on the racialisation of Muslims of South Asian origin in the UK, and those in the North of the UK in particular.

## Background: Rotherham, Rochdale and the emergence of the 'grooming' child abuse scandals

In November 2010, five men were jailed for a series of sex offences committed against children in Rotherham, South Yorkshire (BBC News 2010). The events, labelled at the time as the 'Asian grooming case' by the *Yorkshire Post* (2010), returned to the spotlight in 2012 after an investigation by *The Times* (Norfolk 2012), based on confidential police reports and intelligence, revealed that offenders identified to the police were not prosecuted and that child abuse had taken place on a 'vast scale'. *The Times* alleged that, in the confidential police and council documents they had accessed, there was reluctance to investigate and prosecute Asian offenders due to fear over exacerbating community tensions. Quite predictably, the aftermath of

*The Times* investigation proved to be oxygen for the far right, from fascist groups such as the British National Party (BNP), which subsequently imploded in the 2015 UK general elections, to the seemingly more mainstream United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). However, the events also ignited debate across the media and political spectrum with commentators Right and Left jostling for position in order to offer a perspective on precisely what had transpired to generate – by all accounts – the widespread sexual abuse of female children.

A key moment that heightened interest, outrage, debate and speculation in the Rotherham child sex abuse cases was the publication of a report by Professor Alexis Jay, titled 'Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Rotherham' (2014) and herein after referred to as the Jay Report. Published in August 2014, the major headline to emerge from the report was the author's 'conservative' estimate that at least 1,400 children had been sexually abused and exploited between 1997 and 2013. This revelation of widespread child sexual exploitation dominated the news headlines for several days and resulted in the Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council leader Roger Stone stepping down with immediate effect, followed by a string of other high profile resignations (most notably of Shaun Wright, the South Yorkshire Police Crime Commissioner who, in somewhat farcical and ultimately futile circumstances, had initially refused to stand down). The fallout from these revelations was dramatic and is in many senses an on-going process; debate has raged on the roles of race, ethnicity, class and gender in facilitating the abuse of women and of catastrophic and possibly corrupt individual and institutional failure from agencies including the police, council and social services. This article examines the ways in which the Rotherham child sex case abuse cases and their aftermath were reported, whilst also referencing the Rochdale child sex abuse cases (see Tufail and Poynting, forthcoming, for a more detailed analysis and discussion of the events that took place in Rochdale). The reporting and representation of the events in both Rotherham and Rochdale are contrasted with the reporting and representation of child sexual exploitation cases not involving individuals characterised as Muslim or Asian.

### **Representing deviance: A comparative exercise**

The immediate fallout from the Jay Report involved a flurry of newspaper headlines and reports condemning the abuses. The *Daily Express* (2014: online), for example, presented its outrage by railing against the 'Muslim gangs' operating in Rotherham whilst declaring that '... the feelings of ethnic minorities or those on the Left who presume to speak for them has no part to play'. In similar fashion, *The Telegraph* ran an article by columnist Allison Pearson (2014) suggesting that the root cause of the abuses ran at the heart of either (or both) the Muslim and Pakistani community. Pearson, noted for her bigoted, outspoken views, took issue with the cultural allowances 'the West' had made to these seemingly backward communities. As Pearson explained, 'Leaders of the Pakistani Muslim community – essentially a Victorian society that has landed like Doctor Who's Tardis on a liberal, permissive planet it despises – are at pains to deny that the grooming gang's behaviour has anything to do with ethnic origin or contemptible attitudes towards women' (Pearson 2014). Essentially a tirade against Leftists, multiculturalism and political correctness, the article was certainly not alone in adopting this particular focus. Indeed, the Rotherham child abuse scandal was international news, evidenced by an article in the *Washington Post* titled 'Political Correctness about Muslims may have led UK officials to ignore reports of sex abuse' (Grundy 2014). The *Daily Mail*, however, also extended its outrage to rival news outlets with an article by de Graaf (2014) attacking the BBC for not highlighting enough that the abusers in Rotherham were Asian men. The claims were centred on her analysis that 'Four of seven articles on *BBC News online* do not mention Pakistani men' (de Graaf 2014). De Graaf suggested that race and ethnicity were mentioned in the Jay Report and were thus relevant factors in the sexual abuses that took place. Her article, entirely dedicated to attacking the BBC for its apparent oversight, featured support from a UKIP Member of the European Parliament (MEP) and screenshots of a number of Tweets from individuals in agreement with her.

Both tabloid and broadsheet newspapers focussed on the aspects of the Jay Report that related to race and ethnicity. A section of the report was dedicated to 'Issues of Ethnicity' and it concluded that staff across agencies including the council and police were reluctant to frame matters related to child sexual exploitation (CSE) as having an 'ethnic dimension'. On race and ethnicity, the analysis within the Jay Report is evidently weak, with little attempt at nuance and lacking any sense of detail. For instance, it included problematic statements such as '... there was a widespread perception that messages conveyed by some senior people in the Council and also the Police, were to "downplay" the ethnic dimensions of CSE' (Jay 2014: 91). What these 'ethnic dimensions' might be are never discussed or explained by Jay. Rather, the reader is compelled to read between the lines and assume that, as the ethnicities of the perpetrators and victims are different, an 'ethnic dimension' *had* to be at play. The clumsy analysis and phrasing of matters related to race and ethnicity is repeated in the recommendations section of the Jay Report. It contends in Recommendation 14 that: 'The issue of race should be tackled as an absolute priority if it is a significant factor in the criminal activity of organised child sexual abuse in the Borough' (Jay 2014: 93). Again, no attempt is made to examine or explain *what exactly it is* about race that may be such a 'significant factor' in the context of child abuse. This lack of specificity by Jay, I argue, was a contributory factor to the lurid and hysterical headlines which painted a picture of a council and police force failing to prevent child abuse for fear of being labelled racist. This, too, is a rather peculiar contention.

'Asian males', the ethnic category under scrutiny in the context of the Rochdale and Rotherham child abuse scandals, is – within the criminal justice system – a broad-brush category usually referring to individuals of South Asian origin. An Asian person is twice as likely to be stopped and searched by the police than a white person (Equality and Human Rights Commission 2010) and eleven times more likely to be detained at British ports, including airports, than a white person (Hurrell 2013). As Kalra (2006: 234) has noted: 'Systematic racialisation of BrAsian [British Asian] young people has been a routine aspect of policing these communities since their arrival in Britain'. This process of racialisation has affected, negatively, the policing 'service' Asian people within the UK have experienced, as perpetrators and alleged perpetrators, *and* as victims. For reasons such as these many minority communities, including the Asian community, have historically been considered to have been over-policed and under-protected in the UK. In this context then, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the claim in the Jay Report of agencies including the police being reluctant to act for fear of being labelled 'racist' is nothing short of incredulous. To cite some recent examples, fears of being labelled 'racist' have certainly not prevented police forces continually failing to meet recruitment standards for Black and Asian staff as set out by the Macpherson Inquiry (Rollock 2009); or prevented Greater Manchester Police from ordering a re-write of an independent report they had commissioned which alleged institutional racism within the force (Scheerhout 2013).

The Jay Report made 14 recommendations that did *not* focus on the importance of race and ethnicity. These recommendations, primarily focussing on improving the practices and policies of agencies including social services, the council and the police, did not make the headlines of the press in the same way as did the issues of race, ethnicity and 'political correctness'. Indeed, the Jay Report is damning of police actions – or *inactions* – in failing to intervene and to prevent the sexual abuse and exploitation of young girls. Documented victim testimony shows that police officers treated them 'with contempt' (Jay 2014: 1); some examples included girls as young as 13 years of age being blamed for placing themselves in situations where they would be sexually exploited and being described by police officers as 'undesirables' not worthy of police protection. Potential ramifications of such misogynistic and dismissive police attitudes to young female victims of rape and sexual assault are laid out by Kelly et al. (2005) in their study of attrition in reported rape cases. They found that police officers and prosecutors overestimated the scale of false allegations, leading to a 'culture of scepticism' and that discouragement by the police during investigations was a strong reason for victims ceasing to cooperate.



The intense criticism within the Jay Report was not the first time that police failings were identified in the context the sexual exploitation of women and young girls. A police whistleblower in Rochdale revealed, at the height of the media coverage of the events at the time, that police officers in Greater Manchester Police did not take victim allegations of abuse seriously (Deith 2013). Margaret Oliver, a detective constable, resigned in protest after witnessing evidence presented by teenage victims of sexual abuse being ignored by police officers. This theme, of police officers and forces not taking victims of child abuse seriously, continued with criticism of South Yorkshire Police following the Rotherham child abuse cases. A report by Her Majesty's Inspectorate Constabulary, finding that a vulnerable child had been arrested at the home of a sex offender for possessing condoms, surmised that South Yorkshire Police had only a 'limited understanding' of the threat posed by sex offenders to vulnerable children (Pidd 2014). An *ITV News* investigation claimed that several former and serving police officers within Greater Manchester Police had informed them that child abuse was not investigated properly, with one officer alleging a 'cover up' of the issue within the force (Geissler 2014).

In contrast to the extensive newspaper coverage dedicated to sex crimes committed by individuals from certain minority backgrounds, sexual abuse committed by police officers has rarely made the headlines. A little publicised report commissioned by the Independent Police Complaints Commission (Owers et al. 2012) that received very little coverage in the mainstream press revealed over 50 cases of sexual assault by police in the preceding two-year period. The same report also acknowledged that, as police officers were the perpetrators, under-reporting was a significant problem. However, the report authors understood sexual abuse committed by police officers was a form of corruption. The report did not highlight a culture of misogyny or of institutional failings in preventing the abuse. This is in stark contrast to the discourse and representation surrounding the sexual abuse scandals that took place in Rochdale and Rotherham, dominated by claims that inferior cultures and dangerous, Muslim masculinities were at play. Whether representations of sexual abuse committed by groups of white men vary markedly to the representations of the abuse that took place in Rotherham and Rochdale also requires consideration.

### **Beyond race and ethnicity: Representations of white sex offenders**

Between 2010 and 2014, the periods in which the 'grooming' child abuse scandals associated to 'Asian' or 'Muslim' men erupted, a number of similar cases took place where there was considerably less interest in the race, ethnicity or religion of the perpetrators. For instance, in 2010 the *Daily Mail* reported a story about a group of child abusers apprehended in West Cornwall. The headline ran: 'Paedophile ring "groomed young girls before repeatedly abusing them in an empty holiday cottage"' (*Daily Mail* 2010). The pictures accompanying the headline were of five white men. In the article, no reference was made to the perpetrators' race or ethnicity, religion or faith; nor is reference made to the race or ethnicity of the victims. In many if not all other aspects, the facts reported in this case were similar to those reported in the Rotherham and Rochdale cases. In this West Cornwall case, as in the more heavily reported incidents, the young victims of sexual abuse (some as young as five years of age) were groomed and then abused repeatedly over a prolonged period of time. The similarities are evident, yet the differences in how the cases were reported are stark. This was further evidenced by the report of a 13 year old child from North Yorkshire who was sexually abused by thirty men (*Daily Mail* 2013). The pictures accompanying the story were of white men and yet no mention was made of the race, ethnicity or religion of either the perpetrators or the victim. Furthermore, these two news stories were barely reported in the press, in comparison to the events in Rotherham and Rochdale. There was no public outcry, no inquiries were commissioned, politicians did not comment on them and the towns involved were not visited by far right groups and fascists wishing to exploit them for political gain (*ITV News* 2014).

In 2012, a year after his death, the former entertainer and BBC employee Jimmy Savile was linked to scores of sex crimes against predominantly young girls and women (BBC News 2012). At the time of writing, it is believed Savile may have committed sexual crimes against more than one thousand victims on BBC premises (Boffey 2014). Greater Manchester Police has admitted that Cyril Smith, former Liberal MP for Rochdale and also now deceased, should have been charged whilst he was alive for sexual abuse committed against young boys (Dodd 2012). Operation Yewtree, initiated by the Metropolitan Police after the allegations relating to Savile came to light, has now highlighted the sex crimes of other celebrities, leading to the conviction of well-known public figures such as Max Clifford (*The Telegraph* 2014). All of the men currently known to be under investigation as part of Operation Yewtree, including the individuals mentioned above, are white. Yet their race, ethnicity or religion (or that of their victims) does not feature at all in the reporting of the events. As with the sexual abuse of children carried out by groups of white men in West Cornwall and North Yorkshire, the representation of the events, including the perceived motivating factors behind them, contrast significantly to the representation of the events in Rotherham and Rochdale.

One of the common responses to explaining why the events in Rotherham and Rochdale were examined so vividly with regards to race, ethnicity and religion was that the 'Asian' or 'Muslim' gangs carried out not only sexual but also *racist* crimes by targeting white victims. This claim, however, does not hold up to scrutiny for the following reasons. Firstly, the overwhelming theme of the Jay Report presents a picture of vulnerable children repeatedly failed by a number of individuals and agencies whose job it was to protect them. Secondly, the report also makes reference to Asian female victims of sexual abuse, noting that, due to under-reporting from within that community, the true extent of the number of Asian female victims of child sexual abuse is very likely to be higher than is currently known. The Jay Report also cites a report by the Deputy Children's Commissioner for England that dismisses the supposed 'racist' nature of sexual attacks by 'Asian' or 'Muslim' men on white children by stating:

... one of these myths was that only white girls are victims of sexual exploitation by Asian or Muslim males, as if these men only abuse outside of their own community, driven by hatred and contempt for white females. This belief flies in the face of evidence that shows that those who violate children are most likely to target those who are closest to them and most easily accessible. (Jay 2014: 94)

Simon Danczuk, Labour MP for Rochdale, was critical of the role of 'ethnicity' being ignored in the wake of the child sexual exploitation scandal in Rochdale. He re-appeared in the media as the revelations about large scale sexual abuse of children became public and, in an interview alongside a political blogger on Channel 4, aired his views about what he saw as some of the contributory factors that facilitated the abuse. The comments followed on from his analysis of the abuse in Rochdale and he implored that '... Asian men have a propensity [sic] to be involved in this type of abuse' (Snow 2014). Danczuk does not elaborate on this any further and neither is he challenged on this viewpoint by the interviewer. Women Against Rape (WAR), a multi-racial organisation founded in 1976, campaign for women and girls who experience sexual, domestic and racist violence. In their response to the Jay Report and on the point of ethnicity in particular, they note that:

Race and ethnicity were used as an excuse to justify the lack of action against the perpetrators. This presumes that the Pakistani community would stand with rapists rather than victims, which is a blatant piece of racism on the part of the police, the council, the MPs and social services. The Asian community was outraged at the perpetrators and the police and politicians protection of the perpetrators. (Women Against Rape 2014)

Furthermore, WAR highlight agency and police failings of not investigating allegations of sexual abuse, of not believing victims and, indeed, of even criminalising victims. They also highlight 37 questions the Jay Report failed to address, including the roles of the different agencies involved and seeking clarification on other areas that were addressed. However, the most significant criticism is reserved for South Yorkshire Police and their links to historical and on-going corruption scandals.

Men's sexual violence towards women and young girls has only relatively recently emerged in academic and policy debates, propelled by feminist campaigners. Of central importance in understanding men's sexual violence is the role of patriarchy and the intersecting power structures related to race, class, age and status (Radford and Stanko 1991). The theme of male power manifested as sexual violence was evident in the abuse committed against vulnerable young girls in Rochdale and Rotherham, in the abuse committed by police officers, and in the abuse committed by celebrities as uncovered by Operation Yewtree, and is the prevalent theme of all sexual violence against women. Radford and Stanko (1991) noted that, beyond being regarded as a danger for women, sexual violence is not presented as a gendered issue, effectively serving to depoliticise the debate which is predominantly concentrated on individual crime prevention. They further argue that the majority of sexual violence, concentrated within the home, is left ignored and yet, when the state does respond, it routinely fails the victims: '... the bulk of violence to women, that which occurs in private, rarely comes to public attention, is scorned by the police, and the women who ask for police intervention are left neglected and often abused by the very system financed by the state to protect them' (Radford and Stanko 1991: 189). The recent revelations of widespread historic and contemporary sexual violence against women and young girls and the woeful official state responses to these crimes would appear to signify that little has changed in how victims experience the criminal justice system.

Another theme addressed by the Jay Report and which is a significant and prevalent feature of much sexual violence is the exploitation of vulnerable women and young girls. Jay (2014) noted that many of the young girls sexually exploited in Rotherham were in care at the time and that many perpetrators actively targeted these residents' units and services. Significant safeguarding failures were highlighted, the circumstances of which echoed with Jimmy Savile's systematic and widespread abuse carried out within care homes, hospitals and the studios of the BBC. However, it is necessary to go beyond terms such as 'vulnerability' which, whilst important, adopt a politically neutral position. Therefore recognising that many of the young girls subjected to sexual violence from men as typified in the Rotherham, Rochdale and Operation Yewtree cases were from impoverished working class backgrounds is essential. As Novak and Jones (1999) stress, systemic failings at the institutional level effectively assist in facilitating the abuse of poor, marginalised children by the powerful:

What those in power cannot tolerate is that abuse on the scale revealed in some children's homes – and it is highly probable in all institutional settings which supposedly care for the vulnerable poor – flows from the systemic disregard which derives from a conception of sections of the population as being worthless. This worthlessness feeds into their powerlessness which in turn provides those in power with a sense of impunity in their behaviour. (Novak and Jones 1999: 88)

In summarising the fallout of the Rotherham and Rochdale child sexual exploitation scandals, represented within a framework of race and ethnicity, the unpalatable truth may be that the contempt police officers often hold for minority groups was trumped in these instances by their contempt for these vulnerable young girls.

### Impact on the Muslim community

Following the revelation of the child abuse cases within Rochdale and Rotherham and the intense media scrutiny that accompanied them, numerous examples of Muslim and Asian communities experiencing negative consequences became apparent. For instance, there was the recent revelation that, in Heywood, Rochdale, a taxi firm owned and operated by a white man was agreeing to requests from customers to send only white drivers (Thompson 2014a). The Asian taxi drivers of the firm reacted with fury to the actions of the owner and a spokesperson for the group commented that: 'We have done nothing wrong but now we are being treated like paedophiles. You can't tar us with the same brush.' Though the taxi firm later reversed its decision (after all of the firm's Asian taxi drivers walked out in protest), the initial decision of the owner could be a reaction to the racialised and deviant construction of the Asian taxi driver (and, in this particular instance, an attempt to keep his customers happy by agreeing to their racist requests). This was not the first time that such an event had occurred. For instance, *The Telegraph* reported that Rochdale Council employed teenagers to spy on taxi drivers (Ward 2013). The article did not specifically mention that Asian taxi drivers would be targeted but, suggestively, the picture accompanying the headline was of the faces of the eight Asian men jailed in Rochdale for sex offences, interspersed with a picture of a young white woman with her back turned. The activity was touted by Rochdale Council as an 'intelligence gathering' exercise, with the teenagers looking out for 'inappropriate behaviour or language'. Like the actions of the taxi firm owner, Rochdale Council, itself under significant political and media pressure, may have succumbed to a crude form of racial profiling in attempting to seek out possible sex offenders. As a result of the anti-Muslim feeling that subsequently developed within Rochdale (partly due to events such as those detailed here), local people set up a group named Rochdale Muslim Community, highlighting the role that the media and politicians have played in stoking tensions within the town. In a press release they commented that:

Irresponsible comments from senior local and national politicians are aiding the negative portrayal of the Muslim community. Time and time again some politicians and the media have attempted to equate issues such as grooming and the Muslim community as being one and the same. (Thompson 2014b)

Feelings of criminalisation and alienation were also reported in our interviews with second generation British Muslims from the Greater Manchester area. This study, seeking to examine British Muslims' views and experiences of the concepts of 'integration' and 'belonging', coincided with the Rochdale 'grooming' scandal and this event and its fallout were mentioned by all interviewees. For example, Sharaz, a youth worker in his early thirties, spoke of the abuse suffered by Muslims through social media and of how realities such as this had affected his sense of belonging:

... if you go online and, because people can express their viewpoint anonymously now in this day in age by Twitter and Facebook, and anonymous comments on newspaper websites, you realise the depth of the hatred that people have against Muslims. And then obviously that combination of, you know, reading all the literature and the media and stuff. It makes you feel like you know what, you're not really wanted.

Similar sentiments were also expressed by Shaukat, a 27-year old optician who, in referencing the Rochdale child abuse case, felt that the tag of 'Muslim' was inappropriately attached to incidents reported by the media when in fact this information was 'irrelevant'. Imran, a thirty-one year old British-born teacher was also frustrated with the label of 'Muslim' being attached in popular discourse to the 'grooming' cases and he compared this to the reporting of child abuse within the church, which did not appear to carry the same stigma. The themes emanating from our interviews were validated with similar comments expressed by participants of a



recent *Channel 4 News* report titled 'I don't feel British and I don't want to be' (Baig 2014) following coverage of British-born Muslims travelling overseas to fight in Syria and the Rotherham child abuse scandal. For example, Jarrar Mughal, interviewed for the *Channel 4 News* report, stated:

I mean white people commit sexual crimes, no-one talks about Catholic or Protestant groomers. No-one talks about atheist groomers. It's always to do with people of colour, and their sexual habits, or their religion, or something that holds them out as being different.

Another familiar feature of the fallout of the Rotherham child abuse scandal has been the call, from non-Muslims and Muslims alike, to condemn the abuse. For instance, Nazir Afzal, the Crown Prosecution Service's lead on sexual violence against women and children, argued that there was no religious basis for the abuse carried out in Rotherham and that the role of ethnicity has been overplayed in the media (Gentleman 2014). However, Afzal did inform *The Guardian* reporter that he had hoped for more 'vocal' condemnation of the actions of the abusers. Amjad Bashir (2014), an MEP for the populist anti-immigrant UKIP wrote in *The Telegraph*: 'I am urging the community to get together to say these men do not represent us. They should be seen for what they are and held to account. We who come from Pakistan abhor and hold in contempt these people'. This appeal for Pakistani or Muslim groups to apologise is typical of other calls made for these communities to condemn the behaviour of others that had nothing to do with them (Tufail and Poynting, forthcoming).

## Conclusion

The frequent calls for Muslim and Asian communities to apologise for and condemn the behaviour and activities of apparent members of those communities is not limited to recent examples following the child sexual exploitation scandals in Rotherham and Rochdale. Indeed, there have been repeated demands from newspapers, political figures and 'community leaders' compelling Muslims to speak out in opposition to events ranging from recent reports of British Muslims travelling to fight in Syria to allegations of a 'Muslim plot' to takeover schools in Birmingham. These demands are not simply spontaneous requests for an apology following a crime, atrocity or supposedly regressive practice: rather, they effectively serve as a 'pledge of allegiance' to the state, nation and the hegemonic order. This order, in which British Muslims occupy an inferior position to non-Muslim British citizens, is predicated on the extent to which an individual or community is 'integrated', or not. As Gargi Bhattacharyya (2008: 74) notes: 'Minority communities are challenged to prove their allegiance and integration, however long they have been settled in the 'host' nation'. This is particularly the case with the Muslim community of Britain who, for over a decade, have occupied a position as *the* dangerous minority and the primary subject group of counter-terrorism policy, legislation and state surveillance (Gilmore 2012; Pantazis and Pemberton 2009). According to Bhattacharyya, the othering of the Muslim male has intensified through the period of the 'war on terror', with a focus on perceived (inferior) cultural difference and (illiberal) attitudes to sex:

The shift from what I am describing as 'black' to 'brown' myths is centred around the implied dangers of non-western cultures. There is a reworking of long-running racist myths – so the black rapist becomes the brown man from a backward and misogynistic culture, anti-feminist, sexually frustrated by traditional culture, addicted to honour killing and viewing women as tradable objects. (Bhattacharyya 2008: 97)

That such representation has played out against the backdrop of Rotherham and Rochdale is beyond doubt. This is not, however, an isolated issue of a media hostile to minorities reporting similar cases of sexual violence towards women and young girls with alarming difference.

Rather, as with the cases highlighted in this article, political figures and official reports have contributed greatly to rousing fears of a racialised threat of Muslim men towards white women. However, I argue that the anti-Muslim sentiment fostered in recent times is not simply the preserve of conservatives or of the far right. Following Kumar (2014), I contend that liberals and liberal institutions play a key role in furthering and legitimating anti-Muslim racism as evidenced by effectively correlating race and ethnicity to the sexual exploitation and violence cases in Rotherham and Rochdale.

In the racist imaginary, 'logic' dictates that all Muslims are seemingly on the cusp of radicalisation at any given moment, are failing to integrate by living in segregated communities, and are perverted sexual deviants unable to control their desires. Within a postcolonial context, then, we can begin to make sense of this othering process and of how it successfully reinforces anti-Muslim racism and the more nuanced prejudices that constitute everyday life for British Muslims. The significance of British citizenship pales in comparison to the importance attached to the alien, dangerous Muslim identity and its perceived negative and regressive characteristics. A similar othering process has been confirmed in a recent study by Selod (2015) who interviewed a number of American Muslim men and women on the topic of citizenship. Selod found that racialisation of American Muslims led to what she termed 'de-Americanisation'; this affected men and women differently but essentially referred to private citizens denying this group the same privileges and status of citizenship afforded to other Americans.

I argue that the racialisation of Muslims is an evident and lasting legacy of colonialism. In the case of British Muslims, many of whom are descendants of colonised people from the long-extinguished British Empire, their status as colonial subjects *today* is confirmed by consistently being compelled to integrate, to accept differential and discriminatory treatment at the hands of the state, to 'act' British, and to assume this identity over others. This is, of course, a compulsion directed at groups beyond those solely regarded as Muslim but Muslim communities *in particular* have, in recent times, borne the brunt of these integration demands (see Kundnani 2007; Tufail and Poynting 2013). Within the context of Rotherham and Rochdale, the conjured image is of the dark Muslim male, sexually charged, violent, refusing to integrate and serving as an embodiment of a backward religion and dangerous, inferior culture. This (mis)representation has had serious and deleterious consequences for Muslim communities which have experienced isolation, alienation, racist attacks and criminalisation as a result.

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