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Being Young and a "Muslim Woman" in Post-liberalization India: Reflexive Documentary Films as Media Spaces for New Conversations

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Summary
The Indian documentary film landscape is currently expanding with exceptional dynamism, despite the fact that structural problems such as insufficient funding and distribution mechanisms are still prevalent. The number of film festivals organized in this vein in the country has also increased, allowing documentary films and directors from India to gain a new global visibility, which in turn makes the industry increasingly interesting and relevant for academic discussion. In this article, I focus on three reflexive documentary films by Fathima Nizaruddin that could be considered a trilogy and in which the director has sought to deal with the different points of view of Muslim women on the questions of gender, identity and religion. I argue that a growing interest in these new articulations and critical reflections on the prevailing discourses and visual regimes about Muslim women is discernible in India and is likely to expand in the next couple of years.

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Introduction: Moving from the representation of "fixed" to "fluid" identities of Muslim women?

Starting with the Orientalist production of knowledge and continuing until the present day, the category "Muslim woman" has been constructed and perpetuated through very diverse discursive streams and channels, at local, national, regional and also translocal levels. These discursive channels include, among others, media, states, science and the fine arts as well as the discourses of religious agents and transnational women's organizations. Given the politics of visual and textual representation, as well as the deep polarization, the competing agendas and the specific constellations and contexts in which recurring conversations about "women in Islam/women and Islam" take place, there can be no doubt that the category "Muslim woman" is a particularly essentialized category (Sharify-Funk 2008;

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Kirmani 2009; see also Wenk 2005 and von Braun and Mathes 2007). With regard to the visual representations of "Muslim women" that prevailed until well into the first decade of this century in Western as well as in Indian mainstream media, it was the veil in particular that was either used as a symbol for the oppression of women in Islam or as an efficacious metaphor for anything that was perceived as hidden, opaque and potentially dangerous with regard to Islam or predominantly Muslim societies. Visual images referred primarily to an imagined external danger or enemy, but as Christina von Braun and Bettina Mathes argue, an increased blending of veiled female images and the notion of an "internal enemy" – or "sleeper" – became more noticeable in the aftermath of 9/11 and even more prominent after the appearance of female suicide bombers (von Braun and Mathes 2007: 82).

In India, the focal point of discussions about "Muslim women" is inevitably related to three topics, as Nigar Ataulla, responsible editor of the magazine *Islamic Voice* from Bangalore, argues, namely, the infamous out-of-court repudiation of a wife through the so-called "Triple Talaq," the matter of polygamy, and finally the "veiling" of the woman (Ataulla 2006). Compared to women of other religions in India, they are very often perceived as "submissive," "reserved," and "fragile" and, due to their social conditioning, unable to fight for their own rights (cf. Kidwai 2003: 104–128).

Muslim women in India have of course never been as quiet and passive as they are frequently portrayed, and there are many historical examples of women who have committed themselves in both the public and private spheres and staked their claims to their rights as full members of their communities. Historians like Gail Minault (1998), Barbara Metcalf (1990), Azra Asghar Ali (2000), Siobhan Lambert-Hurley (2007) and Margrit Pernau (2008) – to name but a few – have shown that Muslim women and men alike have constantly strived for new definitions or redefinitions of existing women's rights since the second half of the nineteenth century. With regard to the contemporary situation, however, Tahera Aftab argues in her groundbreaking bibliography "Inscribing South Asian Muslim Women" that studies on the situation of Muslim women in South Asia are still scarce (Aftab 2008: xxxi). Nida Kirmani describes how a more recent academic interest in research into the subject of "Muslim women" first crystallized in the 1970s in the context of a generally increasing interest on the part of Western feminists in "third-world women," according to which the "Muslim women" were often assumed to be the most oppressed members of this group (Kirmani 2009).

At the same time, this construction and representation of the "Muslim woman" in the field of academic research was also founded in a wide range of publications that attempted to explain the social realities faced by Muslim women in India from the perspective of their legal status under the Muslim Personal Law and the gender-specific roles ascribed to them within the religious framework of Islam (ibid.; Schneider 2005). Only in the very recent past has this decontextualized and very

heavily essentialist characterization of the "Indian Muslim woman" been called into question by academic research itself, with the accompanying demands that the peculiarities of region, location, context and social caste be taken more substantially into account than has been the case thus far and that the idea of a clearly definable, coherent group be questioned more strongly than in the past (cf. Searle-Chatterjee 2000).

Furthermore, it could be argued that things are no longer the same after the so-called Arab Spring of 2011, when all of a sudden a large proportion of the visual and textual representations of Muslim women differed quite markedly from the otherwise predominant depiction of "veiled femininity" and the "oppression of women in Islam." Behind the headlines of those days in spring last year, one was able to find a very new kind of visual and textual imagery which added to a new representation of "Muslim women" as social agents or actors and as very active and courageous citizens, whose activism was crucial in bringing forth the revolutionary movement in Tunisia and Egypt. At least for a brief moment in history, it seemed as if the visual images and representations of the movement in Egypt, and especially of the demonstrations in Tahrir Square in Cairo, would succeed in doing what so many researchers, activists, authors and artists have tried to do for years: to make clear, firstly, that there certainly is not and cannot be one coherent group of Muslim women, neither in Europe nor anywhere else in the world, and, secondly, that the diverse ways in which women react to and deal with the over-determined category "Muslim woman," – through their own articulations, personal appearance or performative actions – and how they interpret, reappropriate or reject this category do not necessarily have to be a problem or be seen as problematic. A growing number of young women actively seek the opportunity to position themselves vis-à-vis the hitherto dominant discourse and to express their individuality, self-determination and agency. At least to a certain degree, similar discursive shifts can currently be observed with regard to the perception and self-perceptions of Muslim women in India, and it can be argued that it is above all the women themselves who have recently started the process of redefining and reappropriating (or simply rejecting) this category. They too are doing so in various ways and through very diverse actions, articulations and performative practices.

Based on Nicole Wolf's research on women documentary filmmakers in India in the 1990s and the first decade of this century, I began my preliminary work for this article with the simple question of how Muslim women are portrayed in nonstereotypical roles in newer documentary films from India today, and to what extent these roles become visible in this documented exploration of processual realities. I was further interested in how young "Muslim" documentary filmmakers view the documentary itself, both as a form and as a (new) medium in the media landscape that opens the door to new opportunities for reflection, expression and dialogue. Finally, the third theme I wanted to explore was the memories of the generation born during the transition phase of the 1980s, which thus grew up at a

time of accelerated social differentiation in the 1990s and the first decade of this century. A number of very critical media events – above all the demolition of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya in 1992, the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the anti-Muslim massacres in Gujarat in the spring of 2002 – shaped the worldviews and self-perceptions of a generation for whom individual identity was often not a question of "free choice" and "individual appropriation" – as if being "Muslim" were instead a fixed identity, shaped by highly essentialized concepts and stereotypical representations attributed by others. I wanted to discover how young men and women with such experiences approach the question "Who am I?," which is so central in our youth and adolescence, and what media forms are particularly helpful to them in this voyage of self-discovery.

In this article I focus mainly on the work of director Fathima Nizaruddin, who was born in 1982 in the southern Indian state of Kerala, where she also grew up. At the turn of the century, Fathima traveled more than 2500 km from her hometown Varkala to the Indian capital Delhi to study journalism at the renowned A.J.K. Mass Communication Research Centre at Jamia Millia Islamia University. Following her studies, in 2004, she started working for a large Indian news station in Mumbai called *Time Now*, a joint venture between Reuters and Bennett & Coleman, India. However, she very quickly became disillusioned with her working conditions and the subject matter in news reporting and thus turned to the documentary film. Alongside her work as an independent documentary filmmaker, Fathima has been a lecturer at the A.J.K. Mass Communication Research Centre since 2007. In 2009, she went to London to complete her master's degree at Goldsmiths College.

I intend to focus on three of her films that could be considered a trilogy, although they were not strictly intended to be viewed as such. The idea behind these three films, in which Fathima sought to deal with the different points of view of Muslim women on the questions of gender, identity and religion, was one that she had already explored during her studies at Jamia Millia Islamia University when she filmed *Living "My" Religion* (2004) with her classmate Nida Khan. The second film of the trilogy, *Talking Heads [muslim women]*, was developed in 2009–2010 during Fathima's M.A. studies in London and was filmed almost exclusively on location in the British capital. The third film is entitled *My Mother's Daughter* (2011) and deals with the matriarchal structure of Fathima's family in Kerala, the subjective identity of her mother, and their strained relationship, which has been overshadowed for some years now by the question of when Fathima will finally be ready to marry and/or allow her family to find her a husband.

In the following analysis, I place particular emphasis on the two first films, which formed the basis on numerous occasions for extensive discussions and a longer, semi-structured interview that I conducted in Delhi in September 2011.[1] I am

1 All the interviews referred to in this article were conducted in English.

particularly interested in the level of representation in the films, as well as in Fathima's favored form of reflexive documentary film, by which she enters into a dialogue both with her characters and with the audience, and simultaneously makes her presumptions and intentions very transparent.

This article is based on the assumption that reflexive as well as experimental documentary films are also about the performative expression of a manner of thinking, an approach and a personal attitude, which cannot be attached to or reduced down to a "political position" or "agenda."

Being young and "Muslim" in post-liberalization Delhi: *Living "My" Religion*

> There are times in life when you have answers and times when you are all confused. Right now, I'm in the second stage. If you ask me, I wouldn't exactly know who I am. Somehow, I find that, quite often, what others take me for, is first as a Muslim. Maybe it's due to my scarf (*Living "My" Religion*).

It is with these words that the first of three documentary films in which Fathima Nizaruddin grapples with her individual identity and the meaning of her religion for her own self-understanding and the way in which she is perceived by others begins. *Living "My" Religion* was also her final assignment for her undergraduate degree at the A.J.K. Mass Communication Centre of Jamia Millia Islamia University in New Delhi. She produced the film together with one of her classmates, Nida Khan, her idea for the film having germinated in conversations they had together about "being Muslim." In the film, the two students are also two of the three "talking heads," whilst the third character is Atiya, a student of Islamic studies whom Fathima met in the halls of the Jamia Millia campus. Atiya's appearance in the film differs strongly from that of the two other main characters because she wears the *niqab*, meaning that only her eyes and hands are visible for the duration of the film, her feet also being revealed in one scene. "There was nobody in my family who used to cover themselves from head to foot," she says. Her family opposed her veiling and did not like it in the beginning. "In fact, my father used to call me a walking tent." Her decision to read Islamic studies at university was also initially met with resistance from her family, since she had been expected to pursue a professional career as an IT specialist; indeed, she had already completed the necessary training to study IT at university and had acquired some professional experience in the field. As she speaks about this in the film, she is shown repairing a computer. Other scenes are crosscut with shots of the university campus and also the occasional photograph. On several occasions throughout *Living "My" Religion* we see the three women engaged in discussions about their religion, as well as about their gender roles, not only in Islam but also in Indian society at large. In these discussions, the question is raised time and again as to what "being Muslim" actually means and whether it is possible to define this for others, or whether this remains at the discretion of the individual.

We hear the voice of the second protagonist, Nida, alternately as both the voice-over and directly in interview situations, and she introduces herself with the following words: "I come from a family of believing, practicing Muslims. I've been brought up as a Muslim girl, but even at 23, when people around me seem to be all sorted out about everything in their lives, I'm still groping around for my answers." At the Jama Masjid mosque in Old Delhi, we see Nida dressed in a traditional *shalwar kameez*, while in the other scenes in the film she is predominantly dressed in jeans and a t-shirt. The issue of dress and, more precisely, the issue of dressing in a manner that is considered "appropriate" and "correct" for a Muslim woman, represents one of the central themes of the film and is discussed repeatedly by the three women. The differences between – and indeed the incompatibility of – the three women's positions on the *hijab* lead Fathima to conclude that the film was "a discovery of our differences" and that it thus illustrates perfectly how important this documentary was for the three in that it allowed for a dialogue and a chance to meet which would possibly otherwise not have taken place. On the other hand, the fact that Islam can be understood as a discursive tradition, as a number of academics emphasize, is illustrated very clearly to the audience, and the scenes depicting engaged discussions during which the three characters articulate very different positions about their religion are particularly impressive. Contrary to the generalizations of the Indian mainstream media, which are based on the collective ascription and essentialization of identities, this film paints the individual portraits of each of the protagonists and brings subjectivity to the fore. Their identities are linked neither solely and inextricably with their religious affiliations, nor with their own statements and actions. Instead, it is made clear through their many discussions and reflections on their lives that the women's attempts to negotiate and reflect on their own positions and identities are constantly being rehashed and can thus be seen as being part of a continuous, fluid process.

Increasing discrimination against Muslims in India coupled with anti-Muslim violence – culminating first in December 1992 in the razing of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya (and subsequent riots throughout India) and then in the anti-Muslim massacres that shook the western state of Gujarat scarcely ten years later in the spring of 2002 – were among the phenomena experienced during childhood and adolescence, both personally and through the media, by directors born in the early 1980s. These critical events very much shaped their worldviews and self-perceptions. For Nida, who grew up in Delhi, a question of central importance is how she personally feels about the fact that many Muslims relocated – often under duress – to overwhelmingly Muslim-inhabited areas as a result of this permanent threat of discrimination and violence during the 1990s. "Under duress" also because they were often simply unable to secure lodgings in those areas of Delhi that were not inhabited by a majority Muslim population, purely because of their Muslim

names.[2] This relocation led to criticism of the perceived "self-segregation" and "ghetto-building" of the Delhi Muslims, who have also been faced with a constant suspicion of terrorism since 2001.[3] As Laurent Gayer accurately criticizes, the notion of "insular existences" that accompanies these terms and (media) images is particularly problematic and misleading because it overlooks the reality of many Muslims who are in no way "cut off" from communicative connectivity (through the media) and the various interactions that arise in the course of their working lives in completely different parts of the city every day (Gayer 2012: 236).

An expression of this physical mobility is the scene in *Living "My" Religion* in which Nida speaks about the forced "immobilization" and marginalization of the Delhi Muslims since the 1990s whilst driving through the city. She says that she feels "embarrassed" about her residential address in Ghaffar Manzil (Jamia Nagar[4]), a place for which there is the subtext that "it's a ghetto, a mini-Pakistan, if you please." Nida analyzes the argument of the supposed "security" regained or retained by Muslims who withdraw to areas that are inhabited by a majority Muslim population. Unlike her father, who presents this argument, himself, for Nida the new family home when she was growing up was connected with the experience of a pervasive control over her clothes and the weight of expectations for her to behave "correctly" as a "Muslim woman." Despite these perceptions of narrowness and the restriction of her personal liberty, she is also aware that she shares the same constant feeling of uncertainty and living under threat as other Delhi Muslims:

> But then again, at some level, I do understand the anxiety, the fear, the trepidation of my community. I have them as well. But do we really have to be amongst our own to be safe in India? Though I hate to admit it to myself, I know that in a riot, perhaps I'll be safer here than anywhere else.

If Gayer argues that the social trajectories of Muslims in Delhi, just as in the whole of India, are informed by a memory of violence which extends beyond time and space and which often lingers on long after the abatement of said violence, then this

2 In the summer of 2012, the English-language daily newspaper *The Hindu* carried out investigative research in Delhi and labeled the situation in the Indian capital a "housing apartheid" (Ashok and Ali 2012).

3 "The regrouping of Delhi's Muslims into religiously 'homogeneous' colonies was […] the result of two cumulating trends: the overcrowding of the Old City and the state of fear induced by communal riots […]. Those Muslims leaving the walled city for the less congested periphery (and in particular Jamia Nagar) generally belonged to wealthy bazaar families who retained their shops into the Old City while moving their place of residence. From a trickle, this movement of Muslims within the city turned into a stream after a state of fear engulfed the whole country in the 1990s" (Gayer 2012: 219).

4 Jamia Nagar, literally "university town," designates a larger conglomerate of so-called "Muslim localities" that were originally built up around the Jamia Millia Islamia University. "Spread over fourteen acres, with approximately 375,000 residents, 90% of whom are thought to be Muslims (the small non-Muslim population is mostly composed OF OBCs [author's note: members of the Other Backward Castes] and Dalits), Jamia Nagar constitutes one of the largest concentrations of Muslim populations in Delhi along with Seelampur and Old Delhi. This Muslim population is almost entirely Sunni, although a small Shia population harmoniously coexists with fellow Muslims of Barelwi, Deobandi, Tablighi or Ahl-e-Hadith persuasion" (Gayer 2012: 223; cf. Kirmani, 2008: 355–370).

certainly seems to be evidenced by Nida's statement in the film. Interestingly, we hear her statements concerning her fear of riots as a voice-over to clips from Mani Ratnam's film *Bombay* (1995), in which the South Indian director staged the violent riots between Hindus and Muslims in 1992/93 in such a visually striking and nightmarish way that these are actually very likely to have become a part of the visual memories of the "real" violence for many who saw the film.[5] This aspect of media-related autobiographical memories is also touched upon in a sequence where Fathima tells of one of her early childhood experiences of a "riot" in her hometown in Kerala. From the start of her story, her voice sounds like the backing track to a film as she describes how, at around ten years old, she saw a television series that depicted an abandoned little boy that frightened her so much because she was suddenly and directly confronted with her own experience of "otherness" as a Muslim, and with an unfamiliar sense of isolation:

> The riots in my city didn't last long. Quite a few people died. I noticed something had changed when I went back to school. Now my class teacher had a kind of pity in her eyes when she looked at me. I didn't know how to react, to resent or to be thankful for it.

Not willing or able to provide insight into her personal memories of the violence or her individual fears and concerns about possible violent anti-Muslim riots, Atiya responds to questions about the Babri mosque by saying that, in her opinion, Muslims should not focus too heavily on the past. They should instead concentrate on matters of education and "economic empowerment," "giving the women the Islamic rights" and leading a "good Islamic life." On the one hand, Atiya's statements seem to be indicative of her intense engagement with the discourse of Islamic feminism, in the same way that they show that she advocates a publicly visible religion that is not confined to the privacy of the home. Nida is the one most strongly opposed to this view, arguing that, in the secular sense, religion is the private affair of each individual because it concerns that individual's personal relationship with God.

The continuing debate on the public visibility of (other) religions versus a consistent "privatization" of religion has been particularly apparent in the growing polarization and hardening of attitudes in Europe in recent years. Two clear tendencies can be identified in the mainstream media's portrayal of the debate. On the one hand, the contrast between the two positions is often globally represented as a conflict between the ("enlightened") West and (supposedly "backward") Islam. The widespread assumption that Muslim immigrants have brought a "pre-Enlightenment" or traditional understanding of religion to Europe that will now shake the confidence of or even directly challenge the supposedly secular majority living there, causing us henceforth to evoke Jürgen Habermas's notion of a "post-secular society" (cf. Habermas 2008), overlooks the various trajectories of

5 Other film clips in *Living "My" Religion* are taken from Aparna Sen's film *Mr & Mrs Iyer* (2002).

secularism in many of the former colonies and newly founded post-colonial nation-states outside of Europe. The forgetfulness with respect to and disregard of these entangled histories, which often necessitate repeated, and indeed sometimes fierce debate on the "correct place" and role of religion, not only in Europe but also in nation-states such as India, Tunisia or Turkey, goes hand in hand with a media portrayal of religion that overwhelmingly suggests that the religious subjectivity of Muslims will fundamentally contradict and almost inevitably call into question secular values and principles. However, the positions of religious Muslims who advocate secular principles are largely ignored in this highly polarized debate and are thus absent from the public's understanding of the issue. As José Casanova has argued in a number of different publications, the rifts within a society run neither along European and non-European fault lines nor along religious and non-religious fault lines, but between those groups, institutions and actors representing both the secular and laical positions and those that assign a different role to religion within the public sphere than had thus far been deemed legitimate (Casanova 2006: 23–44).

It seems to be these very same rifts that have divided a group of young Muslim students – all of the same age – at the Jamia Millia Islamia University in New Delhi, and just as no acceptable compromise or agreement has been reached so far in the debate raging in the public arena, no consensus has been achieved at the micro level, thus impeding continued communication and interaction between the three protagonists. As Fathima summarizes in the film, "in the end, we reached no conclusion or answers. There were times when we couldn't agree about a single thing" (*Living "My" Religion*). The film thus goes beyond merely revealing the "diversity" of modern-day spirituality and the notions of religious identity held by young Muslim women in urban India today, even if the desire to show an alternative, counter-representation to the dominant media discourse and stereotypical ideas about the "Muslim woman" was originally one of the reasons Fathima wanted to make this film.

Reflexivity, irony, and satire: Documentary filmmaking and the problem of form

The exploration of the questions about what it means to be "Muslim women" today in a world dominated by a media-visual regime, and of what consequences these stereotypical images have for one's sense of self and one's identity is also a key theme in Fathima Nizaruddin's 2010 documentary *Talking Heads [muslim women]*. Fathima made this film during her M.A. studies at Goldsmiths College in London, although she had the idea for the film much earlier; she was unable to realize her ideas until 2010, when she was finally able to secure funding – a very frustrating experience, but one that nevertheless had a silver lining for the director in retrospect, because "by the time I got funding, I had reached a certain maturity, also with regard to the form I had arrived at the kind of film I want to make, my kind of approach"

(interview, September 2011). Central to her approach is a reflexivity that is clearly recognizable in the form, structure and content of her work. It would have felt too easy to make a film that was purely "positive about Muslim women," because "it has to be both, making an argument, but you need to respect the form also, form has a politics [*sic*]." This statement perfectly encapsulates both the analytical skills and the professional experience that Fathima gained during her first graduate job at a television news station, which she regards very critically (interview, September 2011):

> Do you really legitimize that form by following that form in the work that you do to counter their content? I think there should be a break in form also. You have to delegitimize that form itself. You know, and not just say that what they're saying is not correct and this is the correct way.

In an article published towards the end of the 1970s entitled "The Image Mirrored: Reflexivity and the Documentary Film," film scholar Jay Ruby described the (then) new tendency to reflexivity in the documentary in the context of a general cultural turn towards greater (self-)reflexivity. Ruby's observations referred specifically to the North American context in the 1970s, and thus one has to question their applicability to non-Western contexts and countries such as India, even though Rajagopal argued in a very illuminating discussion with documentary filmmaker Paromita Vohra that the documentary film is a "global form" which – unlike the feature film – cannot be described in the exclusive context of national historical writings (Rajagopal and Vohra 2012: 15). This statement is particularly apt in view of the global growth and densification of media-communicative connectivities over the last 30 years, as well as of the fact that Indian documentary filmmakers not only actively follow international developments but are also becoming increasingly visible and present with their own films, which means that their audience is also becoming increasingly global (ibid.; see also Sen and Thakker 2011: 32; Sarkar and Wolf 2012: 1–6).[6] It is, however, still important to remember that, when considering the recent generation of documentary filmmakers in India, the process through which they have slowly gained new freedoms to explore and experiment with the form of and various processes specific to the documentary film over recent decades has been long and heavily disputed (cf. Wolf 2002: 107f). The developmentalist understanding of the media in general – regarded first and foremost in newly founded, post-colonial nation-states as a tool for bringing about development, social

6 As Sen and Thakker state, this development can generally be supported in the case of South Asia, but it also applies to some degree to the current global interest in "women documentary filmmakers" from this region, who seek to deal with urban social realities in their films: "Documentaries are new Indian art. The consumers are insatiable. […] A decade ago, film curators, and galleries supporting resident artists from developing economies would have turned to the Middle East in search of city-based films, especially since they challenged the gap between the 'Orient and the Occident' while retaining their unique, urban legacies. In contemporary times, however, it is the summer of South Asian filmmakers, and several documentaries about cities are finding their place in the sun" (Sen and Thakker 2011: 32).

change and democratization – appears in India to have been particularly influenced by the perception of the media and, indeed, the form of the documentary film, which is largely attributed to the shaping influence of John Grierson and his "displeasure with discussions about aesthetics."[7] For many decades, Rajagopal and Vohra asserted that the only "significant forms" were the "reality-based or agit-prop influenced [forms], that were easily categorized as the political film" (Rajagopal and Vohra 2012: 8).

Although many filmmakers in India have long since departed from the normative concept that "formalist discussions are a luxury which India cannot afford" (Sarkar and Wolf 2012: 4) and that the documentary film must always be "strongly grounded in realism, avoiding the habits of fiction" (Rajagopal and Vohra 2012: 8), this does not mean that the argument is finally over or, above all, that the acceptance of and support for increasingly experimental, young documentary filmmakers by national funding authorities and film critics in India can be taken as a given.

> Even critics, at least in India, seem to be more reserved when responding to documentaries that foreground an aesthetic or artistic interest. Perhaps they feel that these are less easy to categorize because they do not meet familiar and established codes of the heretofore legitimate documentary aesthetic and require more active, maybe even individual decisions about their political value (Rajagopal and Vohra 2012: 10).

Fathima Nizaruddin nevertheless speaks about the tendency over the past few decades towards a departure from normative concepts within the youngest generation of documentary filmmakers, who no longer wish to adhere to formal categories and conventions: "With the younger generation, I see a shift, doing more things with the form, they want to experiment more – they want to have a break, want to do something new" (interview, September 2011). The matter of securing funding and finding institutional support for these new approaches, as well as for the wish to experiment with formal aesthetics, remains one of the greatest hurdles to independent documentary film in India, as another young filmmaker based in Delhi, Ambarien Alqadar vividly explained to me in an interview:

7 John Grierson's contemporary and joint founder of the National Film Commission in Canada (later: National Film Board, NFB), James Beveridge, spent several years in India and supported the development of a documentary film production unit in Mumbai for the Burmah Shell Corporation. According to his daughter, Nina Beveridge, James produced some 40 documentaries in India between 1954 and 1958, these being filmed up and down the country. She wrote the following about his approach to filmmaking: "After WWII and the formation of UNESCO in 1945, there were concerted efforts to use film as a tool for nation-building around the world. India was defined as one of the key emergent countries, rising out of the ashes of colonialism. Dad applied his Griersonian principles in earnest, helping to shape India's national film board, The Indian Films Division, following the NFB model. His filmmaking followed similar NFB principles (Available online at: http://www.beevision.com/JAB/father3.shtml [Accessed: 2012-09-22]). At the start of the 1980s, Beveridge was also involved in the development of the A.J.K. Mass Communication Research Centre at the Jamia Millia Islamia University (cf. Rajagopal and Vohra 2012: 9).

> I wonder if there is really funding for that kind of experimental documentary work. There is funding for documentary work which is working in the activist mode because that's how festivals and funders evaluate work, or how funders evaluate proposals. It's in the usefulness of the documentary, how useful it is going to be and in [*sic*] going to change, changing [*sic*] certain things, you know, if it's a powerful documentary, if it's a moving documentary. I mean, what if you do not want to make a moving documentary and you want to do experimental work? (interview, April 2012).[8]

On the other hand, the lines between "activist documentaries" and experimental documentary films have become increasingly blurred in recent years, thus leading to sometimes unexpectedly positive decisions concerning the promotion or screening of films in the context of large festivals. Ambarien Alqadar herself experienced this with her film *Four Women and a Room* (2008), her first documentary film to be funded and promoted by the Public Service Broadcasting Trust (PSBT). Using experimental filmmaking techniques, the film deals with the "complex ways in which women understand and experience motherhood" and the issue of sex-selective abortions.

Talking Heads [muslim women]

In terms of the form of her films, it is vital for Fathima Nizaruddin that the audience can critically analyze what they are watching, and that she as a director not only critically examines her work but also makes this analysis of her cinematic representations as transparent and comprehensible for her audience as possible. In this regard, *Talking Heads [muslim women]* is a truly paradigmatic documentary film, with reflexive elements – with which the director consciously works – that are largely ironic and sometimes even parodic. In the article mentioned above, Ruby writes that parodic elements in documentary films still represented a new development at the end of the 1970s and were therefore still rather uncommon, since they were regarded as potentially confusing and thus likely to heighten difficulties in categorizing a documentary filmmaker's work and statements. He stresses, however, that the parody has reflexive qualities since it makes fun of communicative conventions and codes, and thus steers one's attention towards the formal qualities of the film as a film:

> Both cause audiences to question or at least become confused about their assumptions concerning fiction and documentary and ultimately, I suppose, their assumptions about reality. In that sense, they produce audience self-consciousness and have reflexive qualities (Ruby 1977: 6).

We as an audience must adjust both to this pronounced reflexivity and to the obvious parodic and (self-deprecating) ironic elements of the film – and without any warning, as these appear within the first few minutes of the documentary. The

8 Aside from a dearth of funding opportunities, Ambarien Alqadar believes above all that a wider set of spaces and platforms (e.g. art residencies and workshops) where a genuine dialogue on experimental practices can take place is needed.

beginning of *Talking Heads* seems "unordered" and "unprofessional" as we watch the director filming in the mirror, a microphone hanging just in-shot, and listen to an ironically warm "voice-of-God" narration, which comments continuously on what is going on in the director's head. The "friendly voice of God for the time being" fudges the first sentence, causing the director to then show the scene once again, this time "corrected." The audience is then told the following: "This is going to be one of those films where the filmmaker pops up in front of the camera at regular intervals […]."

As the film progresses, the filmmaker informs us about the director's motivations, convictions and presumptions. We learn that the director searched for suitable characters at the East London mosque, where she discovered a women's group called "Inspire!". Asma, Aliya and Shahanara, three women in their early thirties whose families came to London from Bangladesh, answer Fathima's questions more or less willingly, and it quickly becomes clear that they do not consider their individual identities as Muslim women, the media portrayal of Islam, or their personal views on religion and spirituality, or even their *hijabs*, as issues that pose a central problem for them at this stage in their lives. On the other hand, we learn – and here the film seems to link effortlessly with discussions in *Living "My" Religion* – that the director is still grappling with the question of her identity and that she is still working hard to reconcile herself with the media portrayal not only of Islam and Muslims, but also of gender roles in Islam. All her hopes of finding something of a "company in the insecurity club" are dashed, however, as we learn that the three protagonists are primarily concerned with realizing their professional and personal potential, as well as with the compatibility of their individual careers and their family lives. Thus, they are not really worried about "Islam-specific" issues, a point they stress in saying:

> Regardless of wearing the *jilbab* or the *hijab*, just as an Asian woman, when you walk into a workplace – or even just as a woman – you face barriers and you just have to be firm, be confident and mix with people (Asma in *Talking Heads*).
>
> Question (Fathima): Do you feel it would make life easier if you were not wearing the headscarf?
>
> Answer (Shahanara): No, why should it make life easier? Headscarf doesn't make things difficult for me. I've achieved like in the last three and a half, four and a half years, I've achieved so much, I've never had to take the headscarf off, why would I do it now? I mean for me, the hardest part is done. The hardest part was in the house, the transformation of a housewife into a career woman. That was the hardest part […]. Sheer hard work and dedication, that's what it takes. If you want to achieve something in life, it's sheer hard work and dedication, nothing to do with headscarf, nothing to do with Muslim women or whatever […] but obviously, I have to work twice as hard because I don't have the links.

Among other things, the director gives Asma and the other women the opportunity to ask her questions on camera and to then provide a commentary on her answers. Through these perspectives and the ironic, parodic narration, she not only provides

us with insight into her thoughts and feelings, but we also see her at work struggling to edit her material. Indeed, in view of the "stubbornness" of the characters and the numerous ambiguities regarding the formation and weighting of the politico-representative statements in the film, finding a suitable, coherent structure for the film was no easy task, as the friendly voice-of-God narrator ironically remarks: "Hmm, and she was hoping that the filming process will [*sic*] help her in finding some company in the insecurity club. But the problem with documentary characters is that in spite of long hours spent at the editing machine, they manage to have a life of their own."

The possible irritation and unsettling of the audience described by Ruby in relation to the reflexivity and parodic elements of documentary films was something I certainly picked up on at several viewings of the film *Talking Heads*. This may be related to the problem addressed by Rajagopal and Vohra that when watching a film, audiences must weigh up and decide for themselves what "political value" they attach to a documentary film that informs them so openly, reflexively, critically and sometimes derisively about its own development and production. In particular, the strong presence of a director as a sort of fourth "main character" in the documentary who repeatedly broaches the subject of her own uncertainty and confusion regarding her identity, and yet seems to know exactly what she is doing and where she stands on the issue, can seem very inconsistent at times. In accordance with the ever-important question formulated by Sarkar and Wolf about "participation in social and political life via documentary practices" (Sarkar and Wolf 2012: 4), it is in fact individual observation and interpretation that can anchor this participation and positioning in a social and political debate and/or situation.

The still (Fig. 1, see next page) is taken from a scene in which the "friendly voice-of-God" narration explains that "being a Muslim is an issue for her because [author's note: very ironic intonation] you are either with us or with them! [normal intonation] As a result, the filmmaker has developed a paranoia for everyday news reports." These words introduce a sequence of press photography that could be identified as a collection of media icons, since the photos shown have been embedded deep into the collective memory as representations of Muslims post-9/11. The director adds her self-portrait and then poses as a "terrorist," at times also striking an embarrassed pose representing those Muslims who have been "freed" by Western troops. With regard to form, the use of these visual elements of media art in the documentary is very interesting and serves to underline the question of how much power these pictures have to influence those who see them. The audience is thus confronted with the question of how these images affect us and shape our perceptions, as well as the question of whether our personal notions of "Muslim women" are conceivable without any reference to the pervasive reality of these mass media portrayals.

Fig. 1: Film still from *Talking heads*

Source: www.klaketa.net (accessed September 22, 2012).

The audience

For this film, Fathima Nizaruddin had a specific audience in mind, namely, people living and working in Great Britain or Europe "who are also grappling with this immigration problem and Islamophobia" (interview, September 2011). Indeed, "speaking to the other" or setting up a dialogue with a non-Muslim audience, was a further, important motivation for her in making the documentary, and she was successful in doing so in both Europe and India, but not in Great Britain, as she had initially hoped. It is still very difficult for filmmakers from the "Global South" to gain entry into the larger British documentary film festivals, which is why Fathima is now targeting smaller festivals there. *Talking Heads* was nevertheless screened at a Spanish film festival in Pamplona in 2011, as well as at the Kerala Documentary and Short Film Festival in India, among others. Given the lack of sufficient distribution structures for the documentary film in India at present, the fact that the number of documentary film festivals in the country is growing exponentially is vitally important for getting the films out there for the public to see and for being invited to further screenings (see also Waugh 2012: 90ff). The dialogues and conversations with the audience that are so crucial to directors occur less often at the larger festivals than in less anonymous settings such as private screenings followed by discussions with the audience. Shuddhabrata Sengupta passionately describes an

exchange with one audience in India that was very much interested in the documentary film as a medium and in the discussion thereof:

> We know for certain that documentary films, contrary to the expectations of media pundits, strike chords and touch raw nerves in the consciousness of a generation that is condemned to a low and shifting visual attention span by the same media pundits. We have watched hundreds of people, at a time, immerse themselves in our films and come out with insights and responses. We know now that after each screening, the problem has not been about whether people would say anything but whether people would stop speaking once they got started. […] Every film is a catalyst for never-ending conversations (Sengupta 2006: 144).

Fathima does not plan to further examine the issue of the identity of Muslim women after her three films *Living "My" Religion*, *Talking Heads [muslim women]* and *My Mother's Daughter*. Indeed, she says that after these three films it is now time to explore new topics because "in feminist films, after a while, it becomes like they're saying you can only talk about women and you don't talk about other things" (interview, September 2011). At the time of our interview in September 2011, Fathima was already busy preparing for the production of her new film, which deals with the middle class in India, the growing social divides in Delhi and, once again, her critical introspection about her unique perspective and opinions as a documentary filmmaker. The film, entitled *Another Poverty Film* (2012), has since been finished and was screened for the first time in September 2012 at the Open Frame Festival in Delhi. As such, she joins the ranks of a group of Indian documentary filmmakers who are increasingly visible worldwide and occasionally now meeting with considerable success, a group which, in the words of Sen and Thakker, is "[m]oving away from overt feminist debates towards representing the urban not as a category but as a process, with their films reflecting the ways in which their own changing subjectivities are mapped onto complex urban identities" (Sen and Thakker 2011: 32).

Conclusion

Ten years ago (2002), Nicole Wolf wrote that in the view of the documentary filmmakers she had interviewed, the great promise of the pluralization of audiovisual media through the liberalization of the Indian market had not been fulfilled. Indeed, attempts to establish dedicated documentary film channels have collapsed and although airtime has been reserved on public channel *Doordarshan* for independent documentaries and noncommercial films, this has been very limited. Securing funding and finding reliable distribution structures remain perennial problems for independent filmmakers, above all for those looking to innovate and experiment with form, who are still viewed, as before, with skepticism. Following the transitional period of the 1980s and built on a nationalist Hindu ideology, the increasingly market-oriented policy on audiovisual content on public television channels in India favored the "portrayal of a nation comprising a predominantly

Hindu, urban middle and upper class" (Wolf 2002: 102). Minorities in religion, caste and class were thus barely visible or played underprivileged, stereotypical roles (i.e. the employees in the background) (ibid.).

Now, around ten years later (2012), the Indian documentary film landscape continues to develop with exceptional dynamism, despite the fact that fundamental problems like funding and insufficient distribution structures are still very much present. The number of film festivals organized in this vein in the country has increased, allowing documentary films from India to gain a new global visibility, which in turn makes the industry increasingly interesting and relevant for academic discussion. Contrary to feature films (most notably "Bollywood"), this discussion is led not just by academic circles, but also by documentary filmmakers themselves, who are often interested in contributing to and promoting the academic study of the past and present of the documentary film in India. Jay Ruby accurately stated that "both social scientists and documentary filmmakers are interpreters of the world" (Ruby 1977: 10). It is no surprise, then, that the development of a new research area, Indian documentary studies, has also been and continues to be informed to a large degree by highly relevant conversations between filmmakers and academics (cf. Sen and Thakker 2011; Sarkar and Wolf 2012).

This article has showcased Fathima Nizaruddin, a documentary filmmaker from Kerala, now based in Delhi, who has explored issues of religion, gender and identity in her work – including her own identity as a young Muslim woman from South India. Another very interesting young filmmaker is Ambarien Alqadar, also from Delhi. In 2011, she finished her documentary *The Ghetto Girl*, a film about a girl who "obsessively" walks the streets in a predominantly Muslim neighborhood in South Delhi, which is often referred to as one of India's new "mini-Pakistans." The list could be continued, not only with documentary films and directors, but also with a number of other forms of creative expression, with documentary filmmaking being just one of them. As can be observed in the Indian media, a growing interest in these new articulations and critical reflections on the prevailing discourses and visual regimes about Muslim women is discernible and is likely to expand in the next couple of years.

A central question, to which this article contributes to addressing but is in no way able to answer conclusively, concerns the terms and interpretations that can be used to represent and analyze these new constitutions of more fluid identities within academic discussion. My own preliminary exploration of the positions of young women documentary filmmakers has certainly caused me to try not to "Muslimize" them by ascribing to them a religiously founded identity with the label "Muslim women." On the other hand, I can well understand why, despite misgivings to the contrary, Ambarien Alqadar finally decided to work with this term and category. Indeed, there would otherwise be no way of entering into a dialogue defined by the parameters that have thus far framed the discussion:

> I thought of my documentary practice as a dialogue […], like if there is one voice, there should be many more voices, and I thought of my work and I still think of my work as one of the many different voices that pluralize an image, just a singular image of a Muslim woman. And again, I used to think and I still think that how valid it is to call my characters "Muslim women," myself "Muslim woman," and I think that I do so in the context that I feel that the framing has already been done. I think the framing, and the framing is done in the mainstream media that these are the Muslim women, so the parameters are already set. So how do you then dialogue with these parameters if you're not using that very language? […] So a lot of us have used the word "Muslim" in the context of that naming that already happened and it's sometimes as if we were not framed as a minority, perhaps we would not be using the word. But I wonder if it's important then to claim your identity and then say that well it's not just that, it's a much more diverse identity and howsoever you might want to fix us in this term, it is nevertheless a fluid term (interview, April 2012).

Especially following the anti-Muslim pogroms in Gujarat in the spring of 2002, it became an almost moral issue for Ambarien Alqadar to adopt a position that she had consciously labeled as "Muslim woman." In my view, it is also important and very valuable to consider in more depth how the appropriation – or conscious rejection – of an "identity label" occurs or can occur, the identity here being one that has been less often adopted "naturally" or a priori by young people born in the 1980s and 1990s and more often forcibly ascribed to them by others. As regards the new conversations and dialogues that may be made possible through the numerous new media practices and forms that are currently emerging, of which experimental and reflexive documentary films are a particularly incisive and increasingly visible example, I hope that this question will be the subject of further analysis and discussion over the coming years.

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