


ARTICLE

# “Me? At this age?”: A narrative analysis of older South Asian Muslim immigrant women’s subjectivity-formations in migration arrangements

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(Accepted 28 September 2022)

## Abstract

Critical and feminist ageing scholarship has drawn attention to how dominant discourses of ageing negatively impact older women’s identities and social lives. While research intersecting migration and ageing has broadly focused on older immigrants’ settlement experiences, very little is known about the discursive influences over older immigrant women’s sense of agency and social relations. To address this knowledge gap, this study explores the subjectivity-formations of older South Asian Muslim women engaged in transnational migration. Narrative and discourse analysis principles were used to conduct and analyse life story-based interviews with 15 South Asian Muslim older women who recently migrated to Toronto, Canada. Findings indicate that participant subjectivity-formations are shaped by: (a) discourses of ageing; (b) socio-cultural–religious discourses; and (c) discourses of transnational migration. In response, participants engaged in dynamic strategies including conforming, negotiating, creating alternative narratives and/or resisting these discourses to organise their lives. These findings reinforce the continued need to trace the governmentality of structural conditions over ageing migrant women’s lives and their responsive strategies to manage these impacts.

**Keywords:** racialisation; older migrants; South Asian women; Muslim women; discourses

## Introduction

In contemporary ageing societies, old age and older women in particular, are sites of governance (Calasanti and Zajicek, 1993; Katz, 1997). This governance manifests through dominant discourses about ‘ageing’ and ‘gender’ which circulate through social institutions and policies (Phillipson, 2001). For instance, normative social messaging about gender roles and divisions of care and labour ideologically construct the ‘older woman’ identity as a non-productive, state-dependent and family-bound citizen (Estes, 1979; Hooyman *et al.*, 2002). These discursively grounded representations, in turn, regulate the economic and social opportunities available to older women in later life (Freixas *et al.*, 2012).

Feminist gerontological scholars centre their analysis on how older women's identity-formations interplay with their discursive social environments (Calasanti and Zajicek, 1993). One important analytical site to explore this interplay has been international migration which profoundly alters the ageing experience stretched across borders (Phillipson, 2001; Mandell *et al.*, 2015; Torres, 2015). Indeed, current inter-disciplinary research suggests that immigration policies can be ageist and discriminatory towards older immigrants, directly impacting their identity-formations (Horsti and Pellander, 2015; Karl and Torres, 2015). On the other hand, growing transnational ageing scholarship is also tracing how older adults etch their own migration trajectories *in response* to such structural conditions (Horn *et al.*, 2015). For instance, older migrants may actively mould their identities towards transnational mobility if the host country immigration policies provide some level of social welfare support for later-life security (*e.g.* open access to state-supported health-care services post-migration) (Hunter, 2016).

Despite this growing research, the *relationality* between older women's identities and broader social factors such as discourses, policies, social institutions and societal inequities (Estes *et al.*, 2003) still remains under explored. To extend knowledge in this area, this study explores older immigrant women's socially situated identities, or *subjectivity-formations*, within the discourses and social conditions around them. Under this aim, I explore the subjectivity-formations of one particular population segment – older South Asian Muslim immigrant women in Canada. Older South Asian Muslim women represent a sizeable proportion of older adults who immigrate to Canada (Statistics Canada, 2017a). Within immigration policy discourse with increasingly neoliberal preferences for younger, skilled economic migration, older adults (and older women in particular) may be framed as undesirable to the nation-state's imagined immigrant citizenry (Syed, 2022) when positioned against a dystopian view of Canada's ageing population (Clark, 1993; Gee and Gutman, 2000). Furthermore, older South Asian Muslim women are minimally represented in ageing scholarship (Salari, 2002; Salma and Salami, 2019) despite Islam being the second-highest reported religious affiliation among older immigrants in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2011). This under-representation is especially concerning given the rising trend of Islamophobic and racist discourses and policies in western societies which have a traumatic impact on Muslims' health, social well-being and feelings of inclusion (Allen, 2015; McCoy *et al.*, 2016). Older South Asian Muslim immigrant women are an even more uniquely positioned subgroup, as they face sexism, racism, xenophobia, Islamophobia *and* ageism, which has a multi-faceted negative impact on their sense of belonging, identity-making and access to social and material resources (Salma and Salami, 2019). To advance ageing studies' understanding of older South Asian Muslim immigrant women's subjectivity-formations (*e.g.* sense of self, social relations and actions), this article's research objectives are to: (a) illuminate the salient regulatory discourses and associated social vulnerabilities, disjunctures and inequalities apparent in their transnational lives; and (b) understand the strategies they employ to navigate these discourses.

I begin this paper by briefly presenting the policy context within which older South Asian Muslim immigrant women immigrate to Canada. Following this, I illustrate the discourse and narrative methodological framework anchoring this study before presenting the findings of life story-based interviews conducted with

this group. Findings are organised based on the dominant discourses that were either salient or highlighted by older South Asian Muslim immigrant women themselves when speaking about their subjectivities as later-life migrants. Ultimately, these findings illustrate how subjectivity-formation is a *reciprocal* and *intersectional* process between discursive structural constraints and individuals. That is, older South Asian Muslim immigrant women not only traverse multiple layers of interlocking ideological discourses operating in their lives, they actively navigate and negotiate them in various ways through everyday narratives about their lives.

### Policy context

Family-based migration is the primary pathway through which older migrants enter Canada. Global care chains, as a larger social force, frequently drive older women's migration to provide and receive homemaking, and exchange intergenerational, emotional and nurturing care labour (Yeates, 2012; Aggarwal and Das Gupta, 2013).

Family migration falls under 'family reunification' policy, a broader immigration objective facilitating families to reunite with select foreign national kin relations outside Canada, including parents and grandparents, spouse/partner, children or other relatives (under narrow conditions). Since 2011, Canadian family migration policy has provided two main entry options for parents and grandparents of Canadian nationals or permanent residents: (a) the sponsorship programme which facilitates permanent residency and citizenship in Canada; or (b) the super visa, a temporary, visitor visa for parents and grandparents to reside in Canada on a short-term basis (Neborak, 2014).

Both options have a significant uptake among families with parents and grandparents outside Canada. At the same time, the immigration system has steadily made the application process for family reunification files more strenuous for families. Both the sponsorship and super visa options transfer health and care costs of older immigrants away from the state and on to sponsoring family members (Root *et al.*, 2014). For instance, according to the sponsorship programme's 2019–2020 eligibility criteria, a child or grandchild with a family of four sponsoring one parent or grandparent must have a yearly income between approximately Can \$65,000 and \$68,000 for the three preceding years (Government of Canada, 2019). Sponsors must also commit to take care of parents or grandparents financially for 20 years under a sponsorship agreement (Government of Canada, 2019). At the same time, sporadic moratoriums have been placed on the sponsorship programme in favour of the temporary super visa, signalling the country's ideological preference for older immigrants' short-term admissibility instead of long-term inclusion (Neborak, 2014). The children or grandchildren of super visa applicants must also meet financial requirements. For instance, a family of four must have a minimum annual household gross income of Can \$48,167, commit to support the visiting parent or grandparent financially during their stay and ensure the visitor(s) have medical insurance from a Canadian insurance company with at least Can \$100,000 yearly coverage (Government of Canada, 2019). In 2016, 17,327 super visas were issued, with over 60 per cent of visas issued to older women (Statistics Canada, 2017b). As such, these options remain viable mainly for financially secure families able to fulfil these hefty requirements.

## Theoretical framework

Employing a post-structural, feminist and transnational perspective, this article theorises the intersectionality of South Asian Muslim older women's lives in their socio-structural worlds.

The post-structural optic of governmentality (Foucault, 1980) describes discourses as a system of knowledge and power. Through it, I consider dominant or governing discourses as social ideologies and expectations which have a dual disciplinary impact. That is, they not only construct ideological representations of particular identities, they also influence individuals to *negotiate* representations continuously to craft their own subjectivity-formations (Foucault, 1980). Critical ageing studies point to the impact of biomedical governmentality in pathologising ageing in health-care and policy (Biggs and Powell, 2001). Feminist scholars point to body politics as one set of governing practices through which older women construct their subjectivities through self-management of their bodies towards youthful ideals (Rudman, 2015). Relatedly, critical feminist scholars problematise the governmentality of the western gaze about Islam which constructs Muslim women subjectivities as silent, passive and victims of patriarchal subjugation in their communities (Said, 1978; Hoodfar, 1997; Zine, 2002; Razack, 2004). As well, in the context of global South–North migrations, some migration scholars point to the governing power of colonial, nationalist and citizenship discourses to construct migrant subjectivities as perpetually foreign, surveillable, scrutinisable and excludable within immigration systems (Schweppe and Sharma, 2015). Combining this governmentality lens with intersectional feminist perspectives facilitates acknowledging how participants shape and negotiate their own *subjectivities* (i.e. self-articulated knowledges, experiences and activities) within their structural influences (Hall, 2001). While the theory brings a race, class and gender analysis to the forefront, it also allows consideration for multiple and parallel social positions including (but not limited to) religious and/or ethno-cultural identity, and citizenship status (Crenshaw, 1991; McCall, 2005). Through this perspective, I consider older South Asian Muslim immigrant women as taking up varied subject-positions in relation to the dominant discourses and corresponding social conditions infiltrating their lives (Calasanti and King, 2015). This active 'position-taking' is central to subjectivity-formations (Bamberg, 1997) – the process by which individuals can adopt different responses such as 'adapting', 'reworking', 'transforming' or 'resisting' dominant norms of governmentality to craft their own discourses to organise their everyday lives (Butler, 1993: 123). Specialised perspectives within feminist theory provide additional theoretical richness for analysis. For instance, transnational feminism facilitates exploring the gendered dimensions of historical colonisation, geopolitical inequalities and contemporary global migration patterns on migrant women (Mohanty, 2003). As well, I draw on Islamic feminist perspectives to disrupt the implied secularity of participants' sense of agency to instead theorise it as an expression of their religious teachings and values (Salem, 2013).

Finally, a transnational lens transitions our theoretical viewpoint beyond geographical terms to acknowledge subjectivity-formations as occurring across time and space (Portes, 1999). Centrally, this perspective helps consider how individuals may simultaneously maintain, negotiate and/or forgo old and new geographical

space-linkages through their migratory activities (Portes, 1999; Scharf and Keating, 2012; Baldassar and Merla, 2014).

Consolidating these perspectives, this article focuses on how older South Asian Muslim immigrant women may navigate societal constructions about their lives in varied ways within the hybridity and messiness of their transnational spaces (Faist, 1998; Vertovec, 2001; Näre *et al.*, 2017).

## Method

This article presents the findings from qualitative interviews with participants using an interpretive narrative inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Gubrium and Holstein, 2007; Goodson and Gill, 2011; Goodson, 2012) and discourse analysis (Foucault, 1980) approach. A life story-based data collection approach was used to prioritise the oration and content of participants' narratives (Hall and White, 2005) and their language, discourses and meaning-making. Together, these methods allowed a narrative exploration of participants' subjectivity-formations (*i.e.* the perceptions, identities, actions and discourses) as storytellers in a socio-historical context (Andrews, 1991). I also explored how older South Asian Muslim immigrant women not only took up the discourses of broader social constructs (*e.g.* ageing, woman, immigrant, Muslim) and institutions (*i.e.* policy, public narratives, news media) to make meaning of their subjectivities, but also how they navigated and negotiated them to create their own alternative narratives.

## Data collection

Recruitment followed purposive, convenience and snowball sampling from personal and participants' social networks. Participant recruitment occurred in the Greater Toronto Area, Ontario, Canada, in neighbourhoods with the highest concentration of older immigrant populations of South Asian and Muslim descent, and in immigrant and older adult-serving agencies such as community health centres, walk-in clinics, local mosques, formal and informal social groups, adult day centres, libraries, food courts and mall walk programmes.

The inclusion criteria for participants included individuals self-identifying as Muslim and women, who migrated at age 55 or over, whose country of origin is in South Asia (*i.e.* Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Bhutan, Maldives, Sri Lanka and Nepal) and who could verbally communicate in English, Urdu or Hindi. The exclusion criteria included women living in an assisted-living facility (*e.g.* retirement homes and long-term care homes) due to the study's focus on exploring participants' experiences of close proximal living arrangements with kin. Ethics approval for this study was received from the University of Toronto Research Ethics Board.

Study participants were engaged through in-person, in-depth and semi-structured conversational interviews. Interviews followed narrative principles which involved joint exploration (Cole and Knowles, 2001; Goodson and Gill, 2011) of varied topics covering participants' identity-formations, experiences and social lives spanning across multiple time(s) and geographical space(s) and themes of race, gender, faith, transnationalism, and inclusion and belonging post-migration. For example, sample open-ended questions to encourage discussion

around these topics included: How would you describe yourself to me (*e.g.* in reference to ageing, gender, ethno-cultural linkages, racialisation, varied abilities and/or other relevant factors)? How do you think you (*e.g.* your values, beliefs, goals, motivations and relationships) have changed over time while living in different places? What has it meant for you to come to Canada at this time in your life? How would you describe your experience navigating the immigration process? What are some things (*e.g.* at home, within your family, in the community) that have been helpful or challenging to manage your life here? Are there any connections you maintain between Canada and [country of origin]? What do these connections mean to you? Do you keep up with the news, current events or politics? How do you see yourself (*e.g.* your experiences, needs and interests) reflected in these sources? How do you think our broader society perceives older South Asian, Muslim immigrant women?

Interviews spanned between 1.5 and 4 hours across multiple interview sittings. Interviews were conducted either entirely in Urdu or Hindi or a combination of Urdu, Hindi and English.

### **Data analysis**

Audio recordings of interviews were first transcribed through transliteration in roman Urdu to maintain authenticity to the spoken word and capture linguistic nuances (Santos *et al.*, 2015). All identified participant information was de-identified.

Correspondingly, to ascertain how participants' subjectivities relate to these macro socio-structural discourses, techniques of interpretive narrative inquiry and discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995; Clandinin and Connelly, 2000) were applied. These approaches facilitated in identifying the dominant discourses present in participant narratives *and* how participants articulated their responses to these discourses and their influence over their sense of self and social relations. Using inductive content analysis (Creswell, 2003), I first engaged in an iterative process of open-coding using NVivo qualitative research software (QSR International, Melbourne). Repeated reading, coding and re-coding (Burnard, 1991) and memoing paid particular attention to participants' thick descriptions of the self (*e.g.* feelings, hopes, reactions, emotions, experiences), places, incidents and situatedness of their lives through multiple temporal and spatial dynamics (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). The second analytical stage involved moving towards the broader social concepts and representations that participants drew on to make meaning about their lives. This process transitioned from identifying the narratives' semantic, grammatical and lexical relations (*e.g.* participants' choice of nouns, verbs, adjectives, metaphors, symbolism and sentence/clause structures) to theorising their underlying ideologies, values and power relations (Wolgemuth, 2014). Finally, I delineated participants' most frequent and detailed references to historical, social, political and cultural norms and ideologies, values or processes that have a disciplinary or regulatory impact on themselves and their social relations (Wolgemuth, 2014). This step ultimately led to the identification of broader themes reflecting the most commonly salient and central discourses apparent within and across the interviews (Sandelowski, 1991; Creswell, 2003). This process of

illuminating participants' positioning within macro discourses facilitates exploring how participants organise their individual and social worlds (Schwartz *et al.*, 2011).

To ensure rigour and trustworthiness throughout this process, I used memos, researcher notes, field notes/reflections, member-checking and triangulation strategies (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). The findings (presented below) are organised around common themes across participant narratives and presented using illustrative quotes. These quotes were translated into English at the final writing stage.

## Results

### Study sample

Consistent with life-story approaches (Ojermark, 2007), this study involved a sample of 15 participants, which enabled thick description and rich narrative accounts (Cole and Knowles, 2001). Participants' countries of origin included Pakistan (N = 11), India (N = 3) and Bangladesh (N = 1). All participants self-identified as Muslim and female. Participants came to Canada either through family sponsorship (N = 11) or the Canadian super visa (N = 4). Demographic data collected included participants' ages (ranging from 56 to 76 years with an average age of 66 years) and length of time in Canada since their arrival (ranging between 2 and 10 years). In addition, of the participants who were sponsored by a family member (N = 11), all but one was sponsored by her son (N = 10). Specific socio-economic data (*i.e.* household income) was not collected in line with a personal knowledge of cultural norms which discourage directly asking for one's financial status. All participants, however, shared personal details of their lives prior to migration that are consistent with middle-class lifestyles including moderate generational asset ownership (*e.g.* land), reliance on domestic labour and the fact that all had met the minimum household income thresholds required by Canada's family migration programme. Table 1 summarises the key demographics as shared by participants. Participant names are stated as pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

The findings presented below demonstrate participants' multi-layered subjectivity-formations across three key discursive sites: (a) subjectivities within discourses of ageing; (b) subjectivities within socio-cultural and socio-religious discourses; and (c) subjectivities within discourses of transnational migration. The narrative analysis illustrates how subjectivity-formation is an ongoing contested process within and across each discursive site. Participants engage in a range of activities in relation to their ascribed roles, knowledges and expectations to manage their own and their families' lives across geographical spaces.

### Subjectivities in relation to discourses of ageing

In articulating their personal definitions of ageing between a South Asian and Canadian context, many participants grappled with societal, communal, familial and personal expectations in order to (re)model their roles and responsibilities as older women. For instance, in a post-migration context, participants' previously internalised discourses of ageing intersected with biomedical discourses in the Canadian context which conceptualised ageing as a feared sign of declining health and immobility (Liang and Luo, 2012). This resulted in a perpetual process of scrutinising and regulating individual choices, through which participants

**Table 1.** Individual participant characteristics

Pseudonym	Age	Country of origin	Number of years in Canada	Family class arrangement	Relationship to sponsor under parent and grandparent immigration programme
Beenish	72	Pakistan	5	Sponsorship programme	Sponsored by daughter
Uzma	68	Pakistan	8	Sponsorship programme	Sponsored by son
Jabeen	66	Bangladesh	N/A	Sponsorship programme	Sponsored by son
Mubashira	56	India	N/A	Super visa programme	–
Kauser	62	Pakistan	2	Super visa programme	–
Nighat	61	Pakistan	4	Sponsorship programme	Sponsored by son
Shazmeen	66	Pakistan	5	Sponsorship programme	Sponsored by son
Rukhsar	69	Pakistan	8	Sponsorship programme	Sponsored by son
Iffat	65	Pakistan	2	Sponsorship programme	Sponsored by son
Zahra	Late 50s	Pakistan	N/A	Sponsorship programme	Sponsored by son
Afshan	69	Pakistan	7	Sponsorship programme	Sponsored by son
Farida	67	India	2	Super visa programme	–
Gulzar	70	India	10	Sponsorship programme	Sponsored by son
Rasheeda	71	Pakistan	2	Super visa programme	–
Quratulain	76	Pakistan	9	Sponsorship programme	Sponsored by son

Note: N/A: not provided.

reoriented their ageing subjectivity as a *personal* peril requiring precautionary self-management of negative health developments (e.g. knee problems, hearing issues and memory loss). For instance, one participant, recounting her early days in Canada, assessed herself as being lazy if she was not staying active and keeping up with household chores:

When I first came here – even though I am this age now, I felt like I was getting lazy. So I felt odd, because back home [India], you had help around, someone who



came and cleaned the house. Here my son didn't tell me this and I had to realise on my own that I had to do everything for myself. I thought 'okay maybe this is helping me stay active too'. Then I had to make sure I am doing all the chores, cleaning ... everything. So I don't feel lazy. Some of the other ladies from here – just in our neighbourhood – they tell me it's too much for them to do all this again. But for me, this is better than sitting all day. (Gulzar, 70 years)

This quote demonstrates how the governmentality of migration facilitates the circulation of 'successful ageing' discourses (Liang and Luo, 2012). Specifically, within these dominant discourses, older migrant women may pursue self-directed health and individual lifestyle choices to avoid the 'failures' of ageing (e.g. laziness). For Gulzar, a particular class subjectivity in Pakistan which previously allowed the participant access to domestic support is interrupted in a post-migration context. No longer having access to this labour to facilitate daily living activities, she reconceptualises her own subject position as defined by the value of individual responsibility which requires setting new personal success benchmarks (e.g. not 'sitting all day' and 'making sure I am doing all the chores').

Another participant articulated the determining role of the immigration system itself in fuelling her 'obsession' with optimal health:

Even during the medical exam for our immigration application – I had an issue with my knee. And I got so scared that they would reject it [super visa application]. So I went to a doctor quickly who told me to join the gym over there. It became like an obsession for me since then. I promised myself I would join the gym here too. (Farida, 67 years)

This account illuminates how older women formulate their selfhood in relation to ongoing discourses within immigration regimes which prioritise a pristine health status. Internalising that a 'desired', 'healthy' and hence, 'ideal' immigrant subjectivity determines the acceptance of a visa application (Wiebe, 2009) can prompt women to reproduce behaviours widely associated with being young, healthy and productive. This embodied impact arising out of the immigration system (e.g. a feared rejection of a visa application if a medical exam indicated low health status) has a disciplining impact and reflects the emergence of a biopolitical and biomedical subjectivity (Ong, 1995). As the above quote indicates, the system surveils and governs the ageing-gendered-migrant body right from the time of screening to its eventual entry and stay in the nation-state (Ong, 1995). Post-migration, participants' performativity of biopolitical subjectivity is maintained through their own everyday health-management practices (Foucault, 1980). For instance, as Farida stated, despite incorporating walking in her routine to manage her arthritis, super visa stipulations do not give her access to provincial health care and require her family to purchase expensive medical insurance. Unable to afford medication costs in Canada, she manages her health issues through expensive and onerous steps – either travelling back to India herself to buy medication or paying someone to deliver them to her in Canada.

Furthermore, while some participants moulded themselves towards neoliberally aligned active ageing behaviours, others relied on cultural understandings of

ageing which conceptualise it as a natural progression towards lesser activity and slowed pace. For instance, some women frequently assessed themselves based on how well they fit within normative standards of ageing using the Urdu- and Hindi-language phrase '*Iss umar mein?*' ['At this age?']. '*Iss umar mein?*' is a colloquial phrase in Urdu and Hindi, commonly used by South Asian older adults (Kaur *et al.*, 2019). It can frequently function as the speaker's self-deprecating assessment of their own or others' actions, behaviours and feelings in comparison to internalised and societal normative standards of ageing. It also serves as a relational epistemology through which ageing individuals may distinguish their own positionality and worldview from other (younger) age groups. The following examples illustrate how some participants similarly used this phrase. For example, Rasheeda (71 years), describing how the super visa requirements force her to travel frequently between Pakistan and Canada, noted: '*Iss umar mein main kahan idhar udhar bhaag sakti hoon?*' ['At this age, how can I run around here and there?'].

For another participant, experiencing social isolation and loneliness post-migration destabilised her previously held assumptions of ageing as a time of relaxation:

I'm alone for 6 hours by myself. When the winds blow here in the quiet afternoons (*sigh*). It feels so agitating. The silence makes you want to just run out of the house. *Iss umar mein* [At this age], coming all the way here is very strange. Everyone is over there [Pakistan]. I always thought this was supposed to be my time to relax but I am always worried about when I can go back. (Quratulain, 76 years)

In both quotes, '*iss umar mein*' is a discursive signifier. The phrase anchors participants' ageing subjectivities and represents the incongruence between their personal definitions *versus* societal constructions and expectations of ageing in western contexts. Both Quratulain and Rasheeda characterised ageing as a time of slower pace. While Rasheeda previously associated her ageing subjectivity with limited agility, she described re-orienting this belief within a migration context to actively keep up with the frequent travel and mobility stipulations embedded in visa policies. Similarly, Quratulain had foreseen ageing as a time of relaxation but the uprootedness and lost social connections resulting from migration disrupted this long-held expectation. She poignantly positioned herself as having to undergo a 'strange' process of migration at her age, exemplifying her wrestling with the active ageing discourses which invoke neoliberal principles to idealise ageing as continued productivity, agility and ability (Van Dyk, 2014).

Other participants illustrated how cross-regional definitions of ageing can influence their self-conceptualisations as ageing women. For example:

Here, I am seen as a senior, right. I consider (*pause*) from my country [Bangladesh], 60 is seen as almost more than half of the journey is done. In our country, once you cross 50, you will feel like 'I am already old'. South Asian women especially, they feel like 'Wow, I am old'. But here, theoretically – first-world country – when people talk about 65 [years] as seniors ... I don't agree. Because immigration section never did research on who feels like a senior. Many seniors I meet, may be 75 years old. They say 'No I don't feel like a senior. I am evergreen. I feel 30 or 40'. But I met with somebody who's 55 and they already feel

like a senior. They say 'Why do I have to wait for this service or that service [to be eligible], I am a senior. I am over 50'. So this is very culturally based, right. They got the messaging from early on that over 50 is a senior. (Jabeen, 66 years)

In the above quote, along with invoking biomedical/chronological concepts (e.g. specific age references), ageing is described as a *subjective* experience – that is, the feelings and self-perceptions about ageing that people assign to themselves regardless of their chronological age (Hagestad and Settersten, 2015). On the one hand, Jabeen prioritised the *subjectivity* of ageing as an agentic decision, since a 'felt age' can differ from its social expectations (e.g. a 75-year-old feeling like a 30- or 40-year-old). On the other hand, she also noted that local cultural schemas of the country of origin may shape older women's subjective embodiment of ageing. Along with this, in the context of migration and transnationality, the 'felt age' must be negotiated between the country of origin and the host country's own distinct social schemas which may define old age differently.

Here, Sara Ahmed's (2004) work on affect and emotion as sites of governmentality facilitates understanding how subjective ageing is influenced by its social context. Ahmed (2004) challenges the notion of feelings and emotions as psychological states that originate internally. Instead, she considers the 'sociality of emotion' (Ahmed, 2004: 9) or seeing feelings and emotions as social and cultural practices. This conceptualisation facilitates theorising emotions and feelings as shaped, expressed and regulated within external power relations and structures. For instance, as the preceding participant quote notes, despite instances of already 'feeling older' at age 50, this feeling can be insufficient to facilitate access to social welfare services in Canada (which typically implements 60+ years of age as a broad eligibility criteria for service access).

### **Subjectivities in relation to socio-cultural and socio-religious discourses**

The participants also explored their cultural and religious knowledge systems through the interviews. Significantly, in the context of pre-migration, women located their memories, histories, wisdoms and practices as an epistemological system to guide the self. Tapping into these past knowledges after migrating helped participants metaphorically move in chronological and reverse-chronological time to synergise socio-cultural disjunctures experienced as a newcomer to Canada.

For instance, as ageing Muslim women, several participants described the importance of maintaining the faith activities from their countries of origin (e.g. attending mosques for prayers, socialising with other Muslim older persons, attending faith education classes) in Canada. The ability to engage in these activities is, in part, spatially facilitated given that the Greater Toronto Area is one of Canada's most diverse regions along ethnic, race and cultural lines and comprises the highest number of immigrants in its province (Ontario Ministry of Finance, 2019). For participants, everyday faith activities become integral to harmonise the geographical distance between countries and overcome the spiritual self's feeling of disrupted flow and discontinuity. As well, aside from formal English conversation classes, none of the participants had been offered or sought settlement services and, thus, typically pursued faith engagement opportunities close to their homes.

Furthermore, participants described that their religious and cultural expression does not occur in a vacuum. As racialised religious-minority women in Canada, participants recognised how their identities intersect with the ideologies and discourses around them. For instance, excerpts from two participants' interviews indicate their introspective negotiation of practising faith individually when observing Islamophobic discourses post-migration. Through this negotiation, they position themselves along an axis of belonging to the nation-state:

Having a masjid, centres, everything near our home is very nice. Very important. Openly being able to pray. Like how I used to do back home (*pause*). But it can't be exactly the same here. Because of all this election talk, my son puts the news. And they always ask the politicians, 'What do you think about Muslims, what do you think about Muslims?' No one asks what Muslims think about the politicians, you know! So I don't know why it is like that. (Kausar, 62 years)

Just like in America. There is a city ... I forget the name ... where a lawyer won a case for the right to make a mosque in a neighbourhood after 11–12 years. Just now, maybe about 6 months back. But like I said. We have to face this inside (*gestures inward*). (Rasheeda, 71 years)

Kausar's narrative illustrates how she constructs her faith-based subjectivity, in part, in relation to the nation-state and global discriminatory trends. On one hand, she (much like the rest of the participants) took up the overarching discourse of Canadian exceptionalism with respect to multiculturalism and a sense of freedom in practising faith openly. At the same time, she contested a parallel dominant narrative she sees which positions minority communities as a commodity in politics, but rarely as an active subject with independent political opinions and preferences. Similarly, naming these ideological processes, Rasheeda references instances where places of worship can be framed as contested and unwanted spaces in western urban neighbourhoods (Isin and Siemiatycki, 2002). For both these participants, these discourses influence how they position themselves within the nation-state's claims to exceptionalism in immigrant acceptance.

In the quote below, Rasheeda, continuing from the aforementioned quote, wrestled with understanding the barriers to getting her visa application approved when asked for her general thoughts about the reasons behind visa rejections:

I don't know. It's a big country. Other South Asian countries, they seem open to them. Is there a difference with us? Same *desis* [*desi* is a Sanskrit language-rooted colloquial term used by various diaspora to signal one's roots to the South Asian subcontinent. Despite its frequent use, it does not necessarily denote all South Asian diasporic identities (Singh, 2007)]. We are good. Hard working. Do they think someone will do something wrong? (Rasheeda, 71 years)

Here, Rasheeda invokes securitisation discourses that reflect the West's increased scrutiny, suspicion and targeting of Muslim populations in a post-9/11 era (Thobani, 2007). Aside from other possible reasons for visa rejections (e.g. stringent

bureaucratic criteria) she mentioned elsewhere in the interview, Rasheeda internalises western discourses which often scrutinise the Muslim subject (Haque, 2010). As such, she crafts her faith subjectivity within this contentious relationship with the nation-state, wondering whether it serves as an exclusionary mechanism that rendered her inadmissible into the country early in the immigration process.

Other accounts reflected how participants specifically moulded their social and familial roles and responsibilities while being aware of rising Islamophobic discourses experienced in everyday places. While the majority of participants said that they did not have direct experiences of Islamophobia, they described its vicarious impact through their extended familial relations. For instance, one participant explains the emotional and care labour she contributes to support her granddaughter experiencing anti-Muslim sentiments at her workplace:

I didn't face those kinds of [discriminatory] comments. But my granddaughter's boss was like that. He would make comments because she used to wear the hijab during Ramadan. She was having a tough time because she can't fight with him right. And she needs the money. So she would come home and tell me first. I would be so hurt and then it would become this big discussion at home. We have to teach our kids who they are otherwise all they hear is bad things from outside. (Beenish, 72 years)

Beenish's narrative illustrates the intergenerational impact of discriminatory discourses and attitudes. Despite not being on the direct receiving end of discrimination, she articulates its impact on her life. This is unsurprising given that Islamophobia, as a system of prejudice, operates through inter-group politics. Indeed, Muslims are frequently discursively constructed as a *collective* threat (Taras, 2012). It is precisely through this communal logic applied to Muslims that the collective and intergenerationally felt impact of Islamophobia is felt through Beenish's granddaughter. As a result of this collective impact, Beenish constructs her subjectivity as a religious and cultural broker to assist her granddaughter to navigate her own religious identity and the discrimination she experiences.

Relatedly, given the constructive capacity of Islamophobic discourses to influence one's sense of belonging in Canada, some participants find novel ways to not only negotiate but *create* opportunities to express their faith identities in the public sphere. One participant who wears the niqab (face-covering worn by some Muslim women as a religious observance) is an active community leader and leads community programming for South Asian older women in a Toronto neighbourhood with one of the highest numbers of South Asian residents. The neighbourhood's rich ethnic diversity and community services provide this participant with the support network to shield herself against facing Islamophobia and other forms of discrimination:

Oh the niqab gives me the confidence to do all this – being a voice for our women. I don't even think about it ... I canvass for [the local Member of Parliament (MP)] here. I gave this whole speech at this event 2 years ago. It was really the highlight of my entire work. I was caught off guard because I hadn't prepared anything but ... whatever I could try, I did. But I was there giving my speech. I was so longing for

someone to take my video. There I was, talking directly to him. Making eye contact with the MP. The MP. Talking housing, education, poverty – all issues for everyone. (Zahra, late 50s)

Zahra pushes back on problematic constructions of hijab- and niqab-wearing Muslim women as backward, silenced and oppressed (Razack, 2004). Specifically, she conceptualised the sartorial significance of wearing the niqab in her political canvassing and community work (e.g. ‘niqab gives me the confidence’) to assert her positionality in taking up mainstream civic and political participation. Indeed, this articulation of an empowered subjectivity is distinct because of its *source*. Specifically, she ascribes her faith-based sartorial choice as the source of her inner confidence and agency, directly contradicting many western secular and feminist constructions of it as a disdainful and intolerable religious symbol and tool to exercise gender oppression (Razack *et al.*, 2010). The importance that a personal faith choice holds in Zahra’s articulation of herself as a voice for fellow Muslim women reflects her reliance on Islamic feminist knowledge systems and epistemologies. Zahra’s niqab reflects a distinct feminist subjectivity and agency, rooted in committing to a personal sense of piety and modesty (Mahmood, 2011). Indeed, the enmeshment of modesty and community activism is reflective of how intersectional feminist scholarship would appreciate the nuanced, multiplicity and simultaneity of subjectivity-formations. Zahra’s quote indicates a socio-cultural and socio-religiously grounded feminist subjectivity taking distinct precedence over one constructed through a western feminist framework (Rinaldo, 2014).

### **Subjectivities in relation to discourses of transnational migration**

Participant narratives also illustrate how the prevailing discourses associated with transnational migration influence the roles and responsibility positions they take up in their lives. In extended conversations, some participants described how migrating under the family reunification system spurs a process of managing multiple familial relations within a transnational space – the ‘here’ (Canada) and ‘there’ (country of origin); for example:

My husband was hesitant to move to another country because he said he was too old. But me. I said that if my children can’t come to me, I am not living without them. The system [Canadian immigration system] makes it so difficult. My husband hadn’t realised how difficult it would be to live alone. But me ... I can’t do it ... And you know our ‘Asian way’, right. Making food, proper breakfast, everything. Feeding my children with my own hands. But my son says, mom, you are dad’s wife too, so he needs you. But I don’t know how to handle that. (Nighat, 61 years)

Another participant (Iffat, 65 years) who migrated alone echoes Nighat’s narrative when characterising herself as a ‘full-time mother’ in Canada (‘here’) and a ‘satellite wife’ for her husband in Pakistan (‘there’). As both participants’ quotes reflect, particular forms of gendered subjectivities are undertaken to preserve familial intimacy and social bonds transnationally (Lamb, 2002). These gendered subjectivities serve as the prime conduits for familial care provision, taking on the specific form of

matriarchal leadership and repairing fragmented familial bonds when situated transnationally.

For some participants, transnational arrangements are experienced as disrupting the ongoing flow of their lifecourse. For instance, when I asked participants to describe their life's future stages and milestones, several shared their long-held presumption that they would spend the later stages of their lifetime in their countries of origin – where they were born and lived through their adolescent and adult years. One later-life migrant participant described a loss of agency, personal will and increasing reliance on destiny and fate for making critical decisions about her life. For instance, this participant left end-of-life decisions about herself (*e.g.* death and burial) to fate:

One thing I realised after going back and forth is that you can't guarantee where you'll die. Obviously, you have this in the back of your mind. I want to be buried where I have lived my life. But now, I have left it to God that I will die where he has intended me to. I can't predict or control that because who knows where I am going to be in a few months. Say my son calls me back, then I will go back. See? (Rukhsar, 69 years)

Rukhsar's quote reflects a transnational subjectivity characterised by a growing ambivalence about where one's final resting will be. Cyclical travel back and forth, such as through the super visa programme, can be disorienting for participants because of constantly uprooting and leaving memories and social connections behind. For older women such as Rukhsar, emplacement under transnational conditions is made difficult by a lack of control and uncertainty over where she will have to travel next (*e.g.* 'I can't predict or control that because who knows where I am going to be in a few months'). Place-making is challenged by affective responses (Conradson and McKay, 2007) in which Rukhsar's struggles to find 'home' are ultimately transformed into ambivalent feelings of its likely impossibility (Markowitz and Stefansson, 2020).

Several participants also described how external financial pressures regulated the migration process and, in turn, influenced their self-worth within the family unit. All participants saw their adult children's sponsorship or super visa arrangement as appropriately fitting within the normative South Asian family lifecycle discourse which expects filial piety as parents age. Yet, some participants spoke about underlying feelings of guilt and discomfort, believing that their migration was burdensome on their children's incomes; for example:

My son doesn't really verbalise how much my being here means to him (*trailing-off laughter*). He actually says 'there's too much *kharcha* [expenses] (*chuckle*) (*pause*). Some kids – until they get married, we are everything to them, but it's natural right. It's also his right to live his life, I understand. My son already invested a lot in the sponsorship process. I keep telling my other son to immigrate too so he can make his future here and I can be with him if it's too costly for my son for me to live with him. (Iffat, 65 years)

This reflection shows how structurally embedded economic discourses applied to family migration arrangements trickle down to the family unit. The economic

language of fiscal efficiency (Harvey, 2007) contextualises the participant's characterisation of her relationship with her son in increasingly transactional and commodified terms (as opposed to fluid and relational). For instance, she re-evaluates and adjusts the performativities of her familial roles through economic discourses. Hence, emotional bonds are seen as *expenses* and familial contributions become *investments*.

Similarly, systemic delays and strict and heavy financial commitments within migration programmes impacted one participant's sense of financial security within her familial relations:

It took ours [the sponsorship application] 8 years. Eight years. You can just imagine ... We only got accepted in 2016. Our medical exam itself was three times. We had put our entire life on hold thinking that we are going to be leaving any day. And then we were told suddenly that our application was approved but we only had 4 months to come here. So we undersold our house and lost so much money because we had no time. We really needed those funds because those might have helped me here too. (Uzma, 68 years)

This quote reflects how the neoliberal discourse of 'individual risk' and 'responsibility' (Ong, 2006) influences participants to become preoccupied with financial considerations in their migration process.

Responding to these neoliberal discourses of economic self-sufficiency inscribed upon multigenerational immigrant families sponsoring older family members (Chen and Thorpe, 2015), some participants articulated alternative discourses that asserted themselves, not as care recipients, but care *providers* for their adult children. For instance, participants described providing maternal support to daughters (e.g. pregnancy and postpartum support), transferring cultural and religious wisdom to children and grandchildren (e.g. teaching ancestral languages and faith principles), supporting tasks of everyday living (e.g. cooking, cleaning, household budgeting), accompanying grandchildren to school, doctor's appointments and recreational activities, and emotional support provision (e.g. ensuring the safety of grandchildren when away from home). One participant (Mubashira, 56 years) explained that she undertook care provision, given her sense of 'self-respect' to not be seen as a burden on anyone. Seeking a dignity of self in migratory arrangements, she resisted common policy and public perceptions which insinuate that older immigrants immigrate for the self-serving reason to access the state's social welfare system.

## Discussion

This study relies on South Asian older Muslim immigrant women's narratives about themselves and their social relations to explore their subjectivity-formations within the power relations of discourses. Findings illustrate how participants' representations of their self-knowledge, actions and experiences reflect a performativity, commitment, negotiation or resistance to the salient ageing, culture and religion, and transnational migration discourses in their lives.

First, older South Asian Muslim immigrant women who participated in this study constructed (and negotiated) their lives within discourses of ageing that



are biomedical, socio-cultural, regional and familial-oriented. Furthermore, these subjectivity-formations are responsive to cross-regional discourses of ageing between South Asia and Canada. For instance, while Canadian policies and systems raise the alarm of an ageing population, many South Asian countries are contending with populations that are 'getting younger'. Living within two social contexts that view ageing from starkly divergent vantage points, participants apply and re-articulate varied conceptualisations of ageing (e.g. chronological, biomedical and socio-cultural) for themselves. They participate in a self-adaptive process of performing ageing that seeks to merge the age discourses prevalent in two distinct regions (South Asia and Canada).

Second, geopolitical inequalities between the global North and South influence participants and their families' post-migration economic outcomes and felt experiences of discrimination and exclusion. Participants are cognisant of various marginalising forces (e.g. ageism, racism and Islamophobia) which can discursively mark them as dependent, unproductive, and religiously and culturally inferior by the migratory nation-state. In response, participants' subjectivity-formations relate to these discursive representations in different ways (e.g. conformity, negotiation or resistance). For instance, in some cases, participants position and rationalise themselves as occupying a contested position on social hierarchies of belonging and legitimacy. In others, such circumstances facilitate participants to take up new roles and performativities in Canada, aimed to channel inner strength and resistance. As such, participant subjectivities are simultaneously formed by parallel discourses of utopian multiculturalism and experiencing discrimination (e.g. Islamophobia). These layers reflect Bannerji's (1997) idea of the perpetual 'belonging-non-belonging' status that racialised women in Canadian space may experience post-migration.

Furthermore, participants organise the flow and timing of their lives around multiple structural factors including bureaucratic layers of the immigration system, their own and their family's desire for physical proximity, and the drive to ensure their children's immigration success. Engaged in gendered mobilities (Uteng and Cresswell, 2008), this self-organisation often results in a financially taxing investment from participants. By migrating under the financially mediated structure of the sponsorship and super visa programmes, participant subjectivities are increasingly informed by expectations of productivity and economic value in line with Canada's idealised representations of desirable immigrants (Simon-Kumar, 2015). As such, participants assess themselves based on the financial value of their familial contributions. At the same time, participants indicate that they pursue these activities to recuperate a sense of agentic power in their lives.

## Conclusion

The findings of this study provide several important insights for ageing practice and service provision, and policy.

Firstly, in Canada, while immigration policies facilitate both economic and family migration, immigrant settlement services remain focused on labour market integration and are virtually non-existent for supporting older family migrants' needs (Lai *et al.*, 2016; Mandell *et al.*, 2018; Türegün *et al.*, 2018). Correspondingly, older

adults' needs are typically addressed through community-based health and social programmes and services, which operate within an increasingly constrained social welfare system (Rice and Prince, 2013). Given that the financial and care responsibility of sponsored older family members also falls directly on sponsoring family members, family systems-based services may consider the socially interconnected and financially dependent care exchanges in older immigrant women's lives. Furthermore, increased policy advocacy is critical to address the systemic gaps in the social services system that do not adequately meet older immigrants' needs. Additionally, working in a precariously funded sector, service providers may best facilitate service access through an acute assessment of local neighbourhood areas with the least community infrastructure and provide targeted support. Public education about available services in neighbourhoods with the highest presence of multigenerational families may further facilitate service reach given that none of this study's participants knew about or had accessed formal services as newcomers to Canada.

Additionally, this study's post-structural, intersectional and transnational approach illuminates how participants manage structural oppressions (*e.g.* feelings of marginalisation, exclusion and discrimination) on the basis of their own and their families' identities, displacement and social isolation post-migration (*e.g.* seeing younger generations in the family experiencing Islamophobia in the workplace). Promisingly, it builds on the small but growing gerontological scholarship on intersectionality-based theoretical and practice frameworks studying racialised and immigrant older adults (*see e.g.* Ferrer *et al.*, 2017; Brotman *et al.*, 2019; Syed, 2022). Thus, the findings of this article stress the increased need for a transnationally informed intersectional framework that harmonises ageing, socio-cultural, faith, nation-state and global realities to address older immigrant women's needs. From a structural lens, such an approach would facilitate recognising that older immigrant women's lives can be situated in a transnational context which does not conform to normative trajectories of migration, settlement and ageing (which have historically seen these experiences as one-time, uni-directional milestones) (Praznik and Shields, 2018). An increased consciousness of global care chains would also help increase knowledge about older immigrant women's heightened matriarchal leadership in familial care provision and reconceptualise oft-held assumptions about care-giver roles in which older family members are presumed 'care recipients' and younger ones as 'care-givers' (Tastsoglou and Dobrowolsky, 2017).

In turn, these structural insights can inform practice efforts at various levels. At the family/social level, service providers can be better-equipped to recognise underlying care burnout, and social isolation and loneliness along with developing tailored respite and relief programming for older immigrant women. They may also promote intergenerational knowledge exchange between ageing women and children and grandchildren, centred on cultural, religious and spatial wisdoms and knowledges accumulated over the lifecourse.

At an individual level, the service sector may focus on key dimensions in women's lives (migrations, mobilities, roles, strategies for coping and resilience). Specifically, to better respond to older racialised and religious-minority immigrant women clients, service providers may explore how they define and express their agentic capacity, what are the internalised ideologies, values and beliefs from

relevant social forces and their facilitative and/or restrictive influence over self-articulations and social positioning, and what everyday practices sustain wellbeing, social cohesion and resilience.

Ultimately, this study compels the ageing field's attention towards the gendered-minority-migrant-ageing body—a metaphorical site through which to theorize racialized older immigrant women's subjectivities and how they manage their lives in broader social conditions.

**Acknowledgements.** The author would like to thank sincerely her doctoral dissertation committee for the invaluable and incredibly generous expertise and guidance to inform this article.

**Financial support.** This work was supported by the Ontario Graduate Scholarship (OGS), Doctoral Completion Award and The Nathan Markus Fellowship from the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto.

**Conflict of interest.** The author declares no conflicts of interest.

**Ethical standards.** Ethics approval for this study was received from the University of Toronto Research Ethics Board.

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**Cite this article:** Syed M (2023). “Me? At this age?”: A narrative analysis of older South Asian Muslim immigrant women’s subjectivity-formations in migration arrangements. *Ageing & Society* 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X22001349>