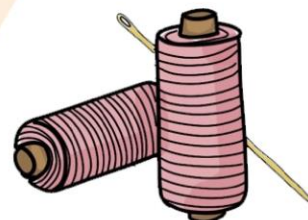
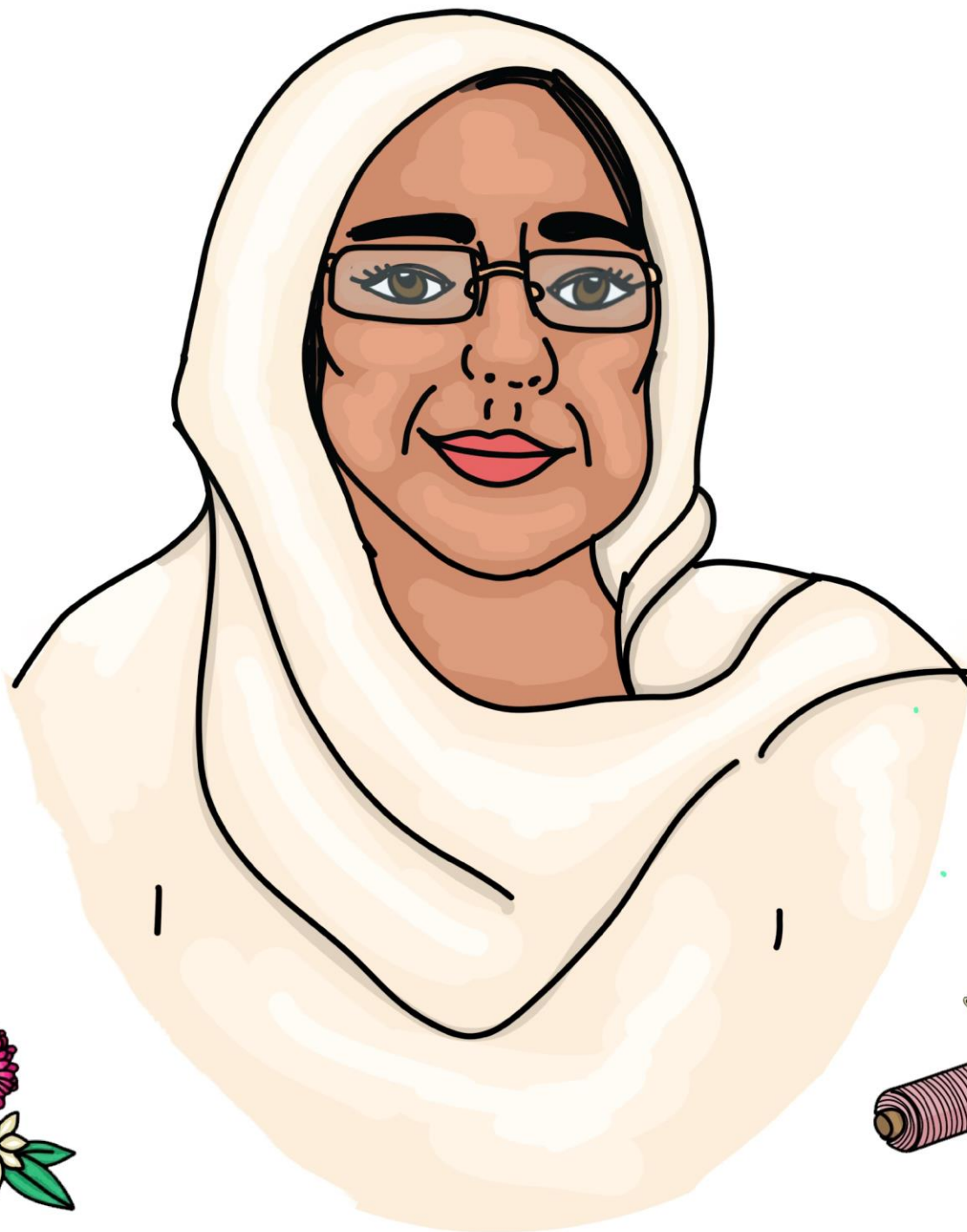




Ageing Equally?

- Textiles, Place and Generation: From Pakistan to Oldham



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Executive Summary

Oldham Coliseum is a regional producing theatre with well-established roots in its local community. In partnership with Dr. Julie-Marie Strange from the University of Manchester, the theatre has undertaken practice-based research as part of *Ageing Equally?*, an Ambition for Ageing programme which aims to generate deeper understandings of what supports wellbeing and makes places age-friendly for minority communities in Greater Manchester, in order to prevent social isolation.

Ambition for Ageing is a Greater Manchester wide cross-sector partnership, led by GMCVO and funded by the National Lottery Community Fund, aimed at creating more age friendly places by connecting communities and people through the creation of relationships, development of existing assets and putting older people at the heart of designing the places they live.

Using material culture and textile practices as a tool to unlock the experiences of women aged 55+ who attend a luncheon club at Pakistani Community Centre in Glodwick, Oldham, the project explored what makes a good place in which to grow older and how the specific life experiences of these women have continued to shape their understandings of place and its role in informing their wellbeing.

Oldham Coliseum Theatre led the research project with facilitators Najma Khalid and Robina Akhter Ullah. Dr. Julie-Marie Strange guided the data collection and analysis; distilling the findings which have informed this report.

Introduction

This project developed the significance of 'Home/Place' as an elastic but inclusive concept in making local environments good places to age. We focused explicitly on the role textiles play in this dynamic for Pakistani women aged 55+ to highlight what makes Oldham a good place to age but, more specifically, to identify needs and opportunities to make Oldham a *better* place for ageing:

- What are the barriers / opportunities to feeling 'at Home' in Oldham and how does age and gender shape this?
- What does 'Home' and 'Place' mean to this specific demographic of Pakistani migrants? How is a conception of 'Home' and 'Place' that is rooted in birthplace refashioned in a British, specifically regional, context?
- In what ways does understanding 'Home' and 'Place' as fashioned by older migrant women demonstrate the ways in which older women matter to their community/ies?
- How do textiles create a complex, multi-dimensional sense of 'Home/Place' that can be recreated in different environments and communicated across generations and different ethnic groups?
- What roles do material culture (textiles) and sewing practices play in creating a sense of 'Home/Place' in Oldham for this migrant community?

22 British Pakistani women aged 55 - 68 engaged in the project. The women all speak Urdu as their first language and the majority have limited English speaking skills. The group live in Glodwick, South Oldham, an area within the top 10% most deprived in England (Burroughs, 2019). The majority of housing in Glodwick consists of red-brick terraces, built originally as dwellings for Oldham's cotton mill workers. The majority of the women live alone in their own homes, and five of the women live in rented social housing. The women meet on a weekly basis at the Pakistani Community Centre in Glodwick for the Luncheon Club. The project took place in and around the women meeting at the Club between April 2019 and October 2019.

Methods and Outputs

The project used 'facet methodology' (Mason, 2011), a cluster of mixed methods that explore different dimensions of everyday life. Facet methodology does not use discrete methods that are subsequently integrated but, rather, draws on creative and imaginative methods that generate flashes of insight into everyday experience and meaning. The 'facets' here drew on creative group interview methods (through workshops) such as memory story boarding, participant-led curation of an exhibition with 'vox pop' encounters, practice-based workshops, and participatory visual methods (as used, for example, in the 'Representing Self – Representing Ageing' project, Richards, 2011).

The data is qualitative and was generated through a) visual and material outputs from the workshops, including drawings, objects, photographs and textiles and b) the participant-led curation of the exhibition. The group took part in a 10-week workshop programme, the content of which they helped co-design in the initial planning stages of the project. In addition to the workshop programme, the group took part in two visits to the theatre and a trip to the Whitworth Art Gallery, during the *Beyond Faith: Muslim Women Artists Today* exhibition (14 June 2019 – 2 February 2020). The exhibition featured the work of five female Muslim artists who explored themes of identity, faith, cultures, otherness and belonging.



Figure 1: Najma Khalid translating captions for the group at Whitworth Art Gallery (July 2019)



Figure 2: The group sketch a piece of work that has resonated with them at Whitworth Art Gallery (July 2019)

Following the visit to the Whitworth, featured textile artist, Robina Akhter Ullah, led six workshops with the group, focused on embroidery and cross stitch. During these activities, lead facilitator Najma Khalid introduced topics for discussion, linked both to the research questions and the textile practices and designs. Stories from the women based on their experiences of place were elicited; the textile work was therefore both a creative output and a practical research method. All sessions were either led or supported by Najma, an Urdu speaking facilitator, who transcribed the stories and experiences of the women after each session.

Midway through the project, the Coliseum hosted a family-oriented event that worked to bring the women's families together and explore the differences in their experiences of place. As first generation migrants, the event highlighted the challenges that the women faced, in comparison to their children and grandchildren. The event was informal, non-public and celebratory and provided a platform for the group to share their experiences of the project with family members, whilst allowing the project team to further understand resonant themes based on the group's reflections.

In addition to this report, the project produced a performance and exhibition, titled 'Place, Textiles and Generation: From Pakistan to Oldham' on 10 October 2019, which was accessed by over 40 audience members in addition to the group. The play, written and performed as a single character monologue, was an amalgamation

of the personal stories told by each group member, captured in the workshop settings. The monologue was performed in Urdu with English captioning, against a simple backdrop of suspended embroidery hoops and white fabric; a colour traditionally worn by older women in South Asian culture. The exhibition, co-curated by the women, featured the textile work produced in the workshops and a range of personal and domestic objects linked to their lives in both Pakistan and Oldham.



Figure 3: Actor Perveen Hussain performing the monologue at the Coliseum (Oct 2019)



Figure 4: The project exhibition at the Coliseum (Oct 2019)

Summary of Findings

- Identity, generation and gender inform experiences of ageing and place.
- Forming a local 'tight-knit' community was essential to this group of first generation migrants, but has led to feelings of being isolated from the wider community.
- Access to transport is a complex and multi-layered issue affecting the group.
- Access to nature is important to the well-being of the group.
- Community spaces are vital for fostering opportunities for this demographic in particular to socialise.

Identity, generation and gender inform experiences of ageing and place



Figure 5: Embroidery work produced by the group, linked to themes of 'Home' and 'Place' (Aug 2019)

When I got my visa, me and my husband had a massive row, I didn't want to leave my home it had all the things I made and I didn't want to travel with all my clothes as I was scared they would get lost. For 4 years here, I really suffered. I so missed my home in Pakistan and my family.

The women who took part in the project came to England in the 1970s as first generation Pakistani migrants. It emerged, throughout the research process, that explorations of place and ageing are tightly informed by this experience. The women's Pakistani roots are highly significant to their identities and thus their experiences of ageing in Oldham. Their cultural memories, expectations and cultural values are shaped, both by their experiences of diaspora and their cultural-gendered roles within Pakistani-Muslim culture.

It was evident at the family-orientated event delivered at the Coliseum that experiences of ageing and place are specific to generations of Pakistani women. For example, three of the women's daughters exchanged how different it was for them growing up as young women, compared to the experiences of their mothers, and similarly, how the experiences of their children will also differ. The findings highlighted within this report, particularly around community, language, education and transport, derive from the experiences of the women as first generation migrants and living within perhaps more traditional, patriarchal structures and values.

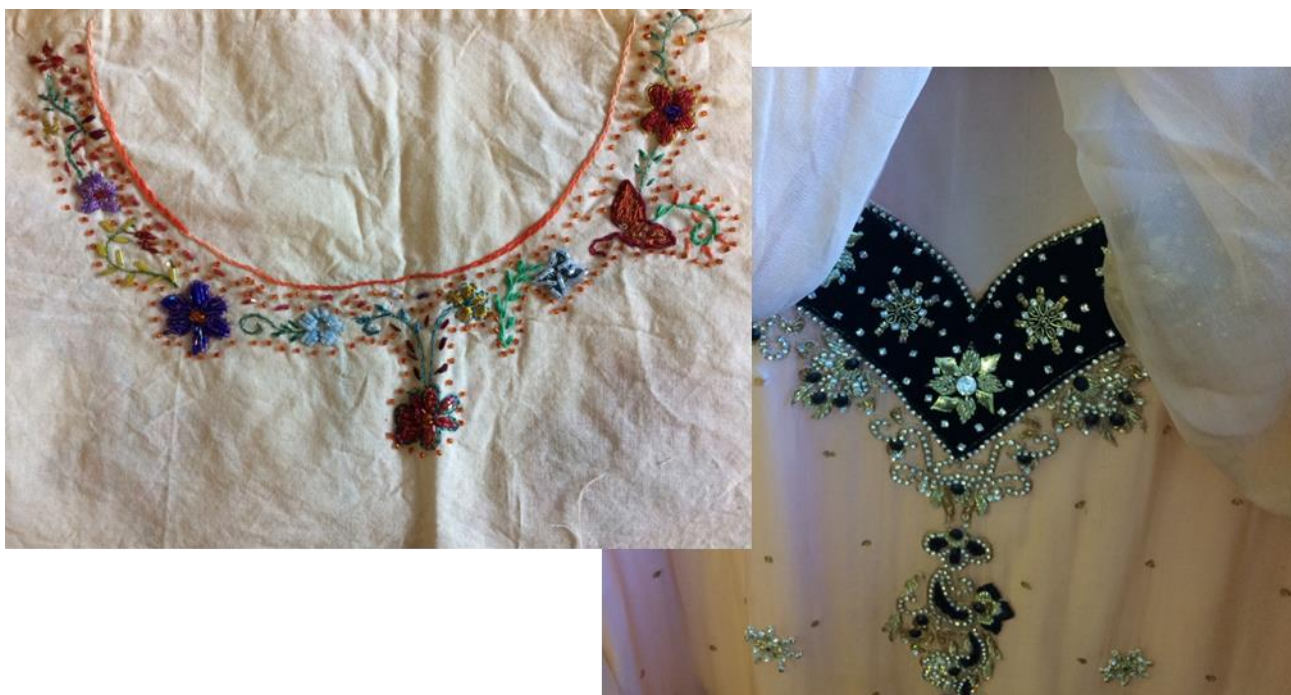


Figure 6: Embroidery produced by the group and an item of clothing belonging to a group member, linked to themes of 'Identity' and 'Home' (June 2019)

My mother visited us in the UK in the 80s and she used to wear this lovely woolen brown shawl. It was winter and we had work going on in the house, often no heating. My mum was so loving towards me and my children, I used to rest my head on her shoulder, the chador – shawl reminds me of her, her warmth her love, there was a distinctive smell to the fabric.

We used to get plain scarves and then sew sequins on them, do embroidery on them, sew lace around the edges, we loved doing this often when the kids were at school, it became a competition thing who made the best scarf who could make the most beautiful scarf, it was drive to make simple clothing and scarves beautiful.

We didn't watch much TV or go shopping so we used to spend time sewing and making things with fabrics.

We used to gather at each other's house in the yards in the evening to cook chapattis, in the tandoors made from chimneys, we would bring what we had sewn during the day to show each other and then take our chapattis home in handcrafted tea towels.

Oldham has good people in it, I love coming to the luncheon club, I share my problems and feel I am heard and supported by my friends here. We all have a lot in common; we faced the same challenges in life. We have a lot of illnesses but coming here when someone talks to you kindly and with respect we feel like our illnesses and problems go away.

The women in the group left their mothers and families in Pakistan. There was much talk about the gap that this left in their lives, as young, newly-married women. The women actively recreated a sense of 'Home/Place' in their households in Oldham through material culture (the use of textiles in decoration and comfort) and practices engaged with sewing, especially embroidery. As lifelong homemakers and carers for their families, the women experienced the broader social and economic textile culture of the North West at one remove but in their domestic labour, textiles represented a vital means of providing comfort and recreating the textile practices of their Pakistani mothers, aunties and female ancestors in a UK environment.

The group, who have known each other since moving to Oldham in the 1970s, described the importance the ongoing role other migrant women have played in their lives, who they have clung to since moving to England for support, shared understanding and solace. When the women arrived in Oldham, textiles were a pastime and source of income that brought the women together. The workshop programme delivered as part of the project recreated a sense of communality around textiles; activating the women's cultural memories through re-engaging in collective sewing and embroidery for the first time in decades. The workshop programme highlighted the importance of providing spaces, activities and gender-specific opportunities for this demographic to meet. These relationships, particularly before the women had children and after their children left home, form the social fabric of the women's lives in Glodwick.

Forming a local ‘tight-knit’ community was essential to this group of migrants, but has led to feelings of being isolated from the wider community



Figure 7: Cross stitch produced by the group (July 2019)

It was so difficult to adapt to the life here, we really had a culture shock, there weren't many of us here in Oldham, and we were very isolated when we first came.

I love the Glodwick community, everyone is very good, we all respect each other, even when I go down the street children and young people I don't even know will say "Salaam"

We are blessed to be a close knit community and we are lucky to have places like the mosque where we unite in sorrow and joy – "in khush in gham"

I once copied the pattern on a teacup and embroidered it onto a kameez (tunic top), I was so bright I could look at a pattern, take a picture in my head and then put it onto fabric, if I had learnt English I would have been in a high profession by now, I really missed the fact that I didn't study but was so capable.

I wish I had learned English and got out more.

Trip was fantastic. We want more trips. We'd like to go to Blackpool.

As first generation migrants, the women quickly formed a tight bond together in Glodwick. The women expressed feelings of being rooted in Glodwick and comfortable with how the area has evolved, with inter-generational connections developed with and between local families over time. The area is well served with local shops, community centres, such as the Pakistani Community Centre where the sessions took place, and mosques, which the group expressed as being important to their sense of place, identity and belonging. However, in addition to the women forming a community together in Glodwick, it is notable that it is one of the most deprived areas in Oldham and, therefore, the group and their families have perhaps been less transient due to lower economic opportunities in the area.

Although the group appreciates their Glodwick roots and the tight-knit community that has been created, initially out of necessity and for safety, it has led to some feelings of being isolated from the wider community. With culturally specific amenities in their direct locality and notably due to the women's role as homemakers, living alongside fellow Urdu speakers, the necessity to learn English and mix with others outside of Glodwick was both challenging and not entirely critical for the women.

The project highlighted and perhaps stimulated the women's appetite for engaging in social and cultural experiences and opportunities that they have seldom accessed before, in later life. Following our trip to the Whitworth Art Gallery and the Coliseum, the women were full of gratitude and expressed their enjoyment in getting out of the area and seeing new places. In the evaluation sessions, the trips were again stressed as being their highlight of the project. Although Najma's interpreting at the art gallery and the spoken Urdu at the Coliseum performance were vital in the women accessing the artistic content of the work at these organisations, the women reported that the social and cultural aspects of the trip itself, such as getting the mini bus out of Glodwick, eating lunch together etc., were equally important to their experiences.

Access to transport is a complex and multi-layered issue affecting the group

We would like to go out more but we don't know how.

We don't know how to get bus pass or get around Oldham.

We don't drive and do not like to pester our children.

I want to do more things but I don't know how to organise and get there ... things like art and visiting places.

Only when I am desperate, I ask family. I save my lifts for doctors.

The majority of first generation, female South Asian migrants never learnt to drive. It was not deemed necessary as the majority of women took up a domestic life. In addition, it was once culturally 'taboo' for women to drive. As a result of this, the women from the group have largely spent their lives within their tight knit communities, and, as described above, this led to few of the women learning English. However, as a result of living in quite an insular community, the group lack knowledge of how to use public transport and/or how to get a bus pass.

The women have relied on their partners/relatives to get around. However, as the women have got older, their children have left home and partners have passed away, they often feel as if they are 'pestering' family members when they ask for a lift and therefore do not regularly ask for assistance. One participant noted that she 'saves' asking for lifts for emergencies, like the doctors. This suggests that the women are often only accessing basic / vital services; missing out on a range of cultural and social opportunities and provision within the town.

We were surprised to learn that none of the women, the majority over 60, owned a free travel pass that would entitle them to travel free on any local bus from 9.30am on Monday to Friday. In tandem with the finding explored in the previous section, this develops a picture of the isolation that the women face from the wider community.

Access to nature is important to the wellbeing of the group



Figure 8: Embroidery work produced by the group, linked to themes of 'Happiness' and 'Wellbeing' (Aug 2019)

When I look out of the window I see my garden, it gives me hope, my house is dark and gloomy and lonely, but when I look out I see light, I see the flowers and vegetables growing that I have planted and nurtured, it comforts me.

I love Alexandra Park

When I go out in Oldham, it feels like life is breathed back into me

The council is quite strict in what you can grow and they don't help with things like cutting the grass, which is hard for us elders and we don't know who to ask.

I love the roses that people grow in the gardens.

The theme of the outdoors emerged as being important to the group, both to their experiences of place and their wellbeing; reflected in their textiles work, adorned with flowers, birds and trees. Oldham's Alexandra Park is on the group's doorstep and was described by many of the women as a real treasured place and local asset. Five of the women described their interest in gardening and it was discussed that they would like more support in this area and, as above, would like to know about local services where they can get help and advice. There are a number of community gardening projects and allotments across Oldham but arguably this is not an activity usually associated with this demographic. We suggest that this is an interesting avenue for further cultural engagement and exploration with this group.

Community spaces are vital for fostering opportunities for this demographic in particular to socialise.

As noted above, the majority of the women in the group live alone in their own houses and there is a cultural assumption that the families of South Asian older people will look after their elder relatives later in life. However, there was an underlying sense amongst the group that social and cultural change had slightly lessened these values and the level of support offered to the women. Due to this, the lack of shared accommodation infrastructure and acceptance of outside care services amongst this demographic in comparison to white British older people, it is critical to the wellbeing of this group that local community spaces are accessible, invested in and preserved. The Pakistani Community Centre is a resource in the local community, and, like the mosques, it provides a vital meeting space for the women.

Conclusion

The project identified how first-generation migrant Pakistani women created a sense of 'Home' and 'Place' in Oldham through a dynamic relationship with memories and material practices associated with birthplace, other women in their community, and the specific opportunities offered by the geography and economy of Oldham. While the project highlighted a largely positive story of finding 'Home' and ageing in Oldham, it also highlighted significant blind spots and areas for development, including the women's sense of feeling isolated from the wider community, problematised by language barriers and a lack of access to basic transport and local information. This factor presented a slight challenge in undertaking aspects of the project as the group heavily relied on the project team to get to and from central Oldham for the trips, less than a mile away from Glodwick.

A strength in conducting the research was co-designing the project with the group, using a facet methodology approach to draw on the women's everyday experiences and cultural memories through the prism of textiles and creative practice. This led to wide-spread commitment amongst the group in attending the workshop programme and trips, and a sense of trust developed very early on amongst the group and the project team. As noted above, the majority of the group engaged in this research live alone and are at risk of experiencing social isolation and loneliness. The group welcomed and valued the provision which suggests further initiatives could and should be developed, to augment and complement the existing work of the Pakistani Community Centre in running the Luncheon Club. As the data in this report illustrates, there is a need and an appetite for further cultural provision for this demographic, that is sensitive to their cultural backgrounds and accessible, whilst also challenging their interests and providing opportunities for them to take part in new experiences.

Written by Dr. Julie-Marie Strange, University of Manchester and Dr. Carly Henderson, Oldham Coliseum Theatre (2020)

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