

SITTING at Tinseltown Diner in Clerkenwell, I hungrily inspect the menu. On offer are generous helpings of bacon, ham and other greasy, fattening fare - all the staples associated with traditional Anglo-American cuisine. MTV is flashing noisily across the half a dozen televisions that line the walls, next to the autographed Hollywood memorabilia.

As an Eastern European waitress takes my order, I realise there is a unique meeting of cultures taking place around me. The food is actually halal and kosher. The joint is teeming with young British Muslims and Jews. The manager, a middle-aged woman in a Muslim headscarf, sits in the corner buried in Tinseltown's account books. She is part of the Arab family who took over the diner in the mid-90s, changing nothing except the food supplier.

Given the diner's success, I marvel at the brouhaha over halal meat that has once again caught the attention of the British press.

Ten years ago, Fuad Nahdi - the founder of Q-News, the Muslim magazine, asked what has proven to be a profound and troubling question: 'is there anything to British Muslim identity beyond beards, scarves and halal meat?' After so many years, it seems we still lack a satisfactory answer. The public face of British Muslims often remains restricted to bearded fanatics, shrouded women suffering in forced marriages, and the ethical vagaries of ritually slaughtered meat. It is as if Muslims - the largest minority religion in Britain - are not shaping this country, or indeed the world, in any other notable way.

Intuitively, we know this can't be true. There are over two million British Muslims and arguably as many unique stories of a community struggling to forge its identity in the face of these damning stereotypes. British Muslims are represented in every ethnic grouping, social class, profession and region. They have so many stories to tell, but is anyone really listening?

Our news columns and television broadcasts fail consistently to reflect this diversity. This one-note coverage drives some second generation British Muslims to demarcate themselves from their fellow citizens - 'if they won't accept me, I won't accept them', they stridently declare. British Muslim, indeed. For this growing and vocal minority, the term is a chimera, another cliché to be paraded when self-styled community leaders and vote hungry politicians want to sound inclusive and civil.

As a young journalist seeking to cut my teeth in the mainstream media, I stand uneasily along this



The East London Mosque on Whitechapel Road taken on a cool crisp winter's evening.

cultural fault line. Who am I then - a Muslim journalist or a journalist who happens to be Muslim? Will I be seen as an eager young woman beginning my professional career - or as a brown woman in a headscarf who can fill a quota and perhaps be the 'token Muslim'? And the scrutiny doesn't stop there. I am expected by fellow Muslims to serve as a spokeswoman for the media. Their questions are unceasing: 'why don't you write more stories about Islam? Why weren't you able to stop that column last week: it made us look so bad? It's your duty to represent the best interests of the community.'

But I do not want to represent anybody. I want to tell compelling stories that inform and make us think about the kind of society we are and might be.

This is part of a larger struggle to be relevant. British Muslims can peg their alienation solely on Islamophobia and intolerance for only so long. The formation of a viable identity is a two-way street. British Muslim scholar Abdal Hakim Murad points