



Hijab, Gendered Islamophobia, and the Lived Experiences of Muslim Women

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Introduction

As the world awaited the results of the 2020 US presidential election with mounting apprehension, Muslim women had ongoing conversations both online and in person, at individual and communal levels, about the consequences, not just of a second Trump presidency, but of the obvious masses of voters who supported him across the country. In particular, many Muslim women who wore the hijab shared newfound or heightened feelings of fear and anxiety about being visibly and identifiably Muslim in public, even in their own hometowns and familiar local spaces. Although perhaps exacerbated, these conversations were not new, and have become more and more frequent with the rise of populist and nationalist sentiments in the US and across the world. Globally, current events like the renewed violence in France and subsequent crackdown by the French government on Muslims in the country, have once again brought to the fore the discrimination faced by Muslims in Western societies. And for Muslim women, a significant portion of the conversation revolves not only around religion but around gender and, in many cases, around the physical marker of their Islam: the hijab.

Islamophobia is more than just a fear or hatred of Muslims. As Julianne Hammer put it, it is “an ideological construct produced and reproduced at the intersection of imperial ideology, political expediency, and the exploitation of nationalist, racial, and religious insecurities.”¹ Therefore, when examining Islamophobia, there are many facets through which it can be understood. In our investigations of Islamophobia, a crucial dimension, which has helped us and others to better understand the lived realities of Muslims with this form of racism,² is that of gender. Understanding gendered experiences of Islamophobia can help flesh out how the Muslim ‘Other’ is constructed in the eyes of a nationalist subject, or those from the majoritarian culture, as Muslim women’s and men’s experiences with Islamophobia are distinct.³ In mainstream narratives that objectify Muslim

¹ Julianne Hammer, “(Muslim) Women’s Bodies, Islamophobia, and American Politics,” *Bulletin for the Study of Religion* 42, no. 1 (2013): 29–36.

² Chris Allen, *Islamophobia* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2010).

³ Ghassan Hage, *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

women—and that often use the image of the hijab to do so—the archetype most commonly associated with them is that of the oppressed and imperiled victim.⁴ At the same time, Muslim women are seen as a threat to liberal values, justifying violence against them and their communities. These representations stand in stark contrast to the actual lived experiences of Muslim women who wear the hijab, which are complex and extend well beyond a singular trope.

This paper explores the experiences of Muslim women with race, racialization, and Islamophobia while wearing the hijab. Through a process of storytelling, we highlight the experiences of individual Muslim women as a way to connect them to the broader contexts of race, religion, and belonging in North American societies. Elsewhere, the notion of storytelling and how it is fundamental to understanding the realities of race and racism have been discussed in detail.⁵ Through storytelling, the voices of the marginalized and oppressed are heard in place of the narratives of dominant groups in society. In this way, this article will utilize the hijab, and the individual and collective experiences of Muslim women who wear it, as a lens through which to understand the workings of Islamophobia in the West. The stories included in this article have been drawn from a number of interviews exploring Muslim women's experiences with Islamophobia in North America.⁶

Islamophobia as a gendered experience

In 1989, Kimberle Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality.” Crenshaw was trying to solve a problem she saw in feminist and anti-racist identity politics at the time: they often glossed over important intra-group differences for the sake of a unified political cause. In other words, the feminist movement often treated all women as if their experiences were one and the same, while the anti-racist

⁴ Sherene Razack, *Casting Out: The Eviction of Muslims from Western Law and Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).

⁵ Osman Umarji and Husain Lateef, “Being Black and Muslim in America: A Study on Identity and Well-Being,” Yaqeen, August 6, 2020, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/being-black-and-muslim-in-america>.

⁶ Most of these interviews formed the basis for Naved Bakali's PhD dissertation and were published in *Islamophobia: Understanding Anti-Muslim Racism through the Lived Realities of Muslim Youth* (Brill/Sense, 2016). Two interviews were taken from a joint book chapter that Naved Bakali worked on with Hadia Mubarak in Hadia Mubarak and Naved Bakali, “Experiences of a Muslim American Academic, Female, and Activist,” in *The Personal is Political: Body Politics in a Trump World*, ed. Christine Salkin Davis and Jonathan L. Crane (Boston: Brill/Sense, 2020), 97–119.

movement treated all people of color as if their experiences were one and the same, with little understanding from either movement of the overlapping space where women of color existed. Intersectionality has since been utilized as a framework that encompasses the layering of multiple identities—including race, class, gender, and citizenship, among others—and how the combined effects of structural marginalization within and toward each of these social identity categories contributes to a unique and layered experience overall for those who identify with more than one marginalized group. Crenshaw argues that those within the same group—for example, women—may carry different identities that shape and intensify how they experience structural violence. As an example, she writes,

Many women of color ...are burdened by poverty, child-care responsibilities, and the lack of job skills. These burdens, largely the consequence of gender and class oppression, are then compounded by the racially discriminatory employment and housing practices women of color often face. Women of color are burdened as well by the disproportionately high unemployment among people of color that make battered women of color less able to depend on the support of friends and relatives for temporary shelter.⁷

Similarly, when it comes to Muslims, it should be recognized that not all Muslims experience Islamophobia in the same ways. Islamophobia operates on multiple levels, and is compounded by struggles of race, class, and gender among others. For Muslim women, then, Islamophobia is experienced not only with regards to religion, but also with regards to gender. With this lens in mind, we can examine internalized, interpersonal, and structural interactions that Muslim women who wear the hijab face as forms of gendered Islamophobia.

To understand the role that the hijab plays in the lived experiences of Islamophobia among Muslim women, in how they are seen, understood, and treated, we must first examine the broader ways the figure of the Muslim woman has been constructed in Western society. The “woman question,” as it has been called, has,

⁷ Kimberle Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (July 1991): 1241–99.

throughout history, been used by colonial powers to justify expansion, invasion, and violence against Muslim societies. And in particular, the hijab has often been at the center of narratives that objectify Muslim women. In Egypt, “colonial feminism” took the form of extreme concern over the veiling of Egyptian women while issues of women’s education, employment, and suffrage in the colonizing society itself were ignored. In colonized Algeria, French generals staged a demonstration in which French women unveiled Algerian women publicly to symbolize the liberation brought to the country by France. Fast forward to the 21st century, the post 9/11 War on Terror narrative has relied heavily on the idea of “saving Muslim women” from their oppressive patriarchal societies. In the context of the US invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, images of Muslim women wearing the hijab were often used to symbolize a gender oppression that justified and in fact necessitated US military occupation, a framing that garnered the support of White American feminist groups as well.⁸ In contemporary French and broader European politics, the hijab has long been an issue of contention, with repeated attempts to ban it from the public space often sparking an increased vigor and commitment to the practice among Muslim women.⁹ As one Australian politician put it, the hijab “has become the icon, the symbol of a clash of cultures, and it runs much deeper than a piece of cloth.”¹⁰ These images and narratives about hijab have been produced and reproduced throughout popular media and political discourse, and impact the ways in which hijab is understood today. In turn, these same narratives play a role in shaping the lived experiences of Muslim women who wear the hijab, some of which we will examine in this paper.

Experiences with Islamophobia in society

The first story discussed in this article is from a young woman named Noor,¹¹ who is a White convert to Islam. Noor described how her interactions with people in her community overall did not seem too negative. However, she still acknowledged

⁸ Razack, *Casting Out*.

⁹ Lila Abu-Lughod, “Do Muslim Women Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and its Others,” *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (September 2002): 783–90

¹⁰ Joan Wallach Scott, *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

¹¹ All names of participants in this article are pseudonyms to protect their identities.

that anti-Muslim sentiments existed. It is possible that Noor felt she had experienced less discrimination, because she was a member of the majoritarian culture and a convert to Islam. Still, what was interesting about Noor's comments was that despite feeling that racism towards Muslims was not too bad, she had personally been targeted by people for her Muslim appearance, and shared a particular incident she faced while taking public transportation:

Noor: They would sometimes insult you and say '*go back to your country*' and stuff like that. Like, I could have answered, I am in my country, but I didn't used to answer anything when things like that happened. But it wasn't nice. I didn't like to take the subway but I used to take it all the time.

And when pressed, Noor elaborated:

Naved: So in some places where you were living you felt that there was some kind of negative impression of Muslims?

Noor: Yeah, yeah, for sure. Once someone started throwing *eggs at me* from a window in an apartment building.

Despite Noor being born and growing up within this community, as well as being a member of the majoritarian population, she had been verbally and physically abused, and taunted to "go back to your country," which is indicative of how wearing a Muslim symbol like the hijab placed her outside of her culture of birth and signified her as 'Other' to some members of society. Noor had never experienced such treatment prior to wearing the hijab. Abo-Zena, Sahli, and Tobias-Nahi have noted that Muslim women who wear the hijab often "experience marginalization caused by hate speech such as being told to 'go back to your country.'"¹² In this instance, we can understand Noor's aggressors as envisioning themselves in a position of power in which they possessed the right to determine what belonged within the norms of their society and what needed to be expelled. Islamic symbols such as the hijab in the case of Noor, despite her ethnic origins aligning with the racialized majority, brought about a situation in which she was marked as contaminating the nationalist space and was told to leave. Noor's

¹² Mona M. Abo-Zena, Barbara Sahli, and Christina Safiya Tobias-Nahi, "Testing the Courage of Their Convictions: Muslim Youth Respond to Stereotyping, Hostility, and Discrimination," in *Muslim Voices in School: Narratives of Identity and Pluralism*, ed. Özlem Sensoy and Christopher Darius (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2009), 3–26.

experiences indicated that her perceived belongingness to society was contingent upon her conformity to the majoritarian culture. Once she veered away from societal norms, she was told to “go back to [her] country,” casting her in the realm of ‘Otherness.’

To place Noor’s experience in context, it is helpful to examine the idea of the nation itself, its perceived borders, and the process of inclusion and exclusion that it necessitates. Zareena Grewal writes that the nation is more than just physical boundaries on a map:

[it is] a place both physical and also imagined, one that is produced and perpetually reproduced by a community of citizens who collectively imagine that they share a deep, horizontal kinship...The collectively imagined affiliations among citizens—and the corresponding imagined separation from people outside the nation’s borders (as well as outsiders within), the perpetually appealing notion of “us” versus “them” sustain the imagined community of the nation...¹³

But why would a social practice such as hijab, indicating an apparent change in *religion*, lead to a perceived change in *race*? After all, Islam is a social practice, and Muslims certainly exist along a diverse spectrum of nationalities, ethnicities, and cultures. Junaid Rana calls this the “race-ing” of Islam, a process by which Islam and Muslims have become racialized through the interconnected histories of imperialism, slavery, war, and conquest. As a result, the Muslim in contemporary America, as Rana argues, is multi-racial: primarily “Arab-American-Middle Eastern” but also Southeast Asian, White, Black, and Latino. As Rana puts it, “Arab, Black, Latino, South Asian, and white have been collapsed into this racial category of the Muslim...”¹⁴ It is important to note that Noor’s experience as a White convert contrasts with those of Arab, Black, Latino, and South Asian Muslim women. For them, the racialized figure of the Muslim overlaps with and is compounded by the racialized figures of the terrorist, the immigrant, the thug.

¹³ Zareena Grewal, *Islam Is a Foreign Country* (New York: New York University Press, 2014). See also Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflection on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991).

¹⁴ Junaid Rana, “The Story of Islamophobia,” *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society* 9, no. 2 (2007): 148–61.

Experiences in school

In another instance, Ayesha discusses her story by reflecting on her high school experiences. Ayesha began wearing the hijab when she was in grade nine. Prior to this, she was able to pass as a member of the White majoritarian population, despite her Arab ethnic origins. Upon wearing the hijab, Ayesha experienced unintended consequences where she felt she had to become a spokesperson for Islam. In her words:

You know, when you're a teenager you feel the world is always staring at you. And you know there were random things that happened here and there but overall it was smooth, except for the fact that I felt that I had to be a spokesperson for the *entire* Muslim *ummah* of the world. Like every time there would be a debate that would happen in class everyone would just sort of look to me and I was 14, I was supposed to justify everything!

Wearing the hijab brought about some stares and other uncomfortable situations within Ayesha's school setting, but the main issue which Ayesha seemed to be annoyed with was that she had to be the representative voice for Muslims whenever there were discussions about Islam or Muslims in her classes. As Ayesha was a high school student during the 9/11 attacks and the pursuant "War on Terror," many of these classroom conversations Ayesha described naturally revolved around those events. Ayesha's comments suggested how members of her school community assumed homogeneity amongst Muslims worldwide. This became apparent to her after she started wearing the hijab, because she became viewed as a cultural representative. The situation described by Ayesha is what some have termed "spotlighting," which refers to the phenomenon of "students of minority religious, ethnic, or cultural groups...[being] spotlighted to speak for or otherwise justify what "their group" thinks or what members of their group do."¹⁵ In subtle ways, spotlighting reproduces the myth that Islam and Muslims are monolithic¹⁶ and that there is not a diverse range of views within the Islamic faith regarding world affairs and conflicts. This is hardly surprising given that Ayesha

¹⁵ Abo-Zena, Sahli, and Tobias-Nahi, "Testing the Courage," 8.

¹⁶ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

could not even be identified as a Muslim until she visibly wore an Islamic symbol which has often been associated with notions of misogyny and the oppression of Muslim women. In essence, spotlighting asks Muslim students to explain why other Muslims engage in acts of terror, assuming that they understand the motivations of those who committed them, or that they could speak on their behalf.

¹⁷ This may result in feelings of guilt by association, especially in the case of the 9/11 attacks, as spotlighting here assumes that the reasoning behind the attacks is somehow explained through the common faith shared by the students and the perpetrators. Ayesha felt a great sense of discomfort when class discussions and debates relating to Islam and Muslims would focus attention on her, because as an adolescent she felt she was being asked to “justify everything” (i.e., the actions of Muslim perpetrators) even though she did not agree with these actions.

What is more, Ayesha’s experience, although it took place in a high school classroom, reflects a broader discourse on Islam that attempts to reduce world events and actions of Muslims to matters of culture, rather than historical, societal, and political processes. In other words, whatever Muslims do or do not do, anywhere in the world, must be a result of their inherent “Muslimness” alone. By this logic, Ayesha, as a Muslim, should have been able to explain the actions of the 9/11 hijackers, given that they ostensibly share the same religion. Following the same logic, in the aftermath of 9/11, there was a concerted attempt by authors, media personalities, researchers, and others to “understand Islam” as a way to explain the attacks. A significant portion of this new focus was on Muslim women in particular. Asking questions about Islam’s rules surrounding women, about the meaning of the hijab, about the belief systems of Muslim women, were meant to somehow explain or demystify an essential difference between Muslim cultures and Western ones, drawing on longstanding narratives about a “clash” between the two.¹⁸ The critical gap in this analysis, of course, is the ways that Muslim societies and Western societies are inextricably linked and tied up in one another’s fates through the latter’s role in the development of the former.¹⁹

¹⁷ Abo-Zena, Sahli, and Tobias-Nahi, “Testing the Courage.”

¹⁸ Bernard Lewis, *Islam and the West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

¹⁹ Abu-Lughod, “Do Muslim Women Need Saving?”

Another young woman named Maryam discussed how her relationships at school changed once she started wearing the hijab:

I didn't really have that many weird experiences in high school but after I started wearing hijab in secondary two, mostly people were still respectful but there were a lot of questions that were asked. So I think it was a very *big* shock for me... they would ask me a lot about all those stereotypical things in our religion. So they always needed clarifications. That happens even now.

Like Ayesha, instead of just being a regular student, Maryam felt she had to become a spokesperson for the Islamic faith and for Muslims once she started wearing the hijab. Some studies suggest that often questions faced by Muslim women in educational settings are “in the context of epithets propagated by the media.”²⁰ In other words, the assumption of ‘Otherness’ underlies these questions.²¹ This was the case with Maryam as she described the types of questions that she was asked as originating from stereotypes associated with Islam. These stereotypes, according to Maryam, included questions relating to beheadings, stoning, and forced marriages, all of which are tropes in the dominant Western discourse about Islam. A number of Maryam’s peers had biased and contrived notions of Muslims and Islam. Once Maryam began wearing the hijab she fit the description of the ‘imperiled Muslim woman,’ which clearly was not the case before when she was a regular hijabless student unqualified to answer questions. Wearing the hijab appeared to provide her with the credentials to discuss ‘Islam,’ or rather the students’ stereotypical views of Islam because she now fit the stereotypical mold. In addition to answering questions relating to stereotypes associated with Islam, Maryam also faced taunts and teasing about wearing the hijab:

Some of the students, I think back then they would call me—just to make fun of me...that was actually *pretty rough*, they would call me Saddam. So

²⁰ Abo-Zena, Sahli, and Tobias-Nahi, “Testing the Courage,” 15.

²¹ Shaza Khan, “Integrating Identities: Muslim American Youth Confronting Challenges and Creating Change,” in *Muslim Voices in School: Narratives of Identity and Pluralism*, ed. Özlem Sensoy and Christopher Darius (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2009), 27–40.

stupid things like that, like Kaddafi, so stupid things like that, but as a joke, I never took it seriously.

Though Maryam says she did not take the taunts of other students very seriously, it is still indicative of how the hijab became a means to change how she was perceived by her peers. Upon donning the hijab she had the names of two violent tyrannical leaders of Muslim countries thrown at her. Maryam's wearing of the hijab in the eyes of some students indicated affiliations to tyranny, oppression, and violence. These experiences also point to how supposed signifiers of oppression, like the hijab, have become entangled with imperialistic discourses, which in the context of the War on Terror, have become increasingly obsessed with the "liberation" of Muslim women. As such, Maryam's wearing of the hijab was not interpreted as a manifestation of religious freedom or self expression, but rather it was symbolic of her 'Otherness,' which needed to be admonished and denigrated. Maryam's classmates also connected her to Arab Muslim figures in particular. Hence, media discourses linking the hijab with violence and terror, and with the Middle East, resonated with perceptions held by students at Maryam's secondary school.

Amina, who was also a high school student during the 9/11 attacks and the onset of the War on Terror discussed how these events affected her relationship with a friend in secondary school:

There was one incident after 9/11 that I recall very strongly. There was this girl that I was pretty good friends with. We used to take the bus together and pretty much right after, the day after [the 9/11 attacks], she just completely stopped talking to me. She actually posted something *really* derogatory [about Islam] in her locker and a teacher had reprimanded her for that and had her remove it. And after that she never spoke to me, after 9/11. And before that we used to take the bus to and from the school together and we were pretty good friends.

9/11 changed the way Amina was perceived amongst her friends. Some have noted that events like 9/11 can cause "students who feel pain or threat, particularly over something out of their direct control... to experience frustration and resentment

towards the social groups they blame for their feelings.²² As Amina described it, her friendship with a good friend effectively ended because of 9/11, as if the student was trying to punish Amina for these attacks. The assumptions embedded in this student's response were that these actions committed by a fringe group of Muslims were representative of the religion of Islam as a whole. Amina being rejected by her friend in the aftermath of the terror attacks for no apparent reason was indicative that she believed sharing a common religion with the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks in some way signaled her acceptance of these acts. Amina experienced a type of guilt by association which inevitably resulted from this friend's monolithic understanding of Muslims and Islam.

In the case of Amina, it was not clear if her hijab was what elicited views of guilt by association. However, Ayesha clearly did feel that the hijab was a symbol which was indicative of affiliation with terrorism and the 9/11 attacks:

One of my friends, she was the only *hijabi* in the grade, the only Arab besides me, so people just started surrounding her. And they weren't trying to bully her, but they were just very curious, right, because they saw *her* people—she's Lebanese—but they saw *hijabis* on TV and they said, you know, did your people do the 9/11? And she's like, those weren't Arabs, those were Afghans. She was in grade seven so she just, she automatically, like swallowed what the news said as well but she like carefully pinpointed it to Afghans. She didn't mention anything about it being Muslims or non-Muslims.

Ayesha at this time was not wearing the hijab but her friend in grade seven was. Consequently, students immediately came to Ayesha's friend to understand more about 9/11. As Ayesha's friend wore the hijab and the news media was inundated with images of hijab-clad Muslim women after the attacks—some of whom were being depicted as celebrating the attacks²³—students came to her wanting to understand the motivations of these acts. Logically, some of the students thought, if

²² J'Lein Liese, "The Subtleties of Prejudice: How Schools Unwittingly Facilitate Islamophobia and How to Remedy This," in *Islamophobia in Educational Practice*, ed. Barry van Driel (Sterling, VA: Trentham, 2004), 57–69 (65).

²³ Joe L. Kincheloe, "Introduction," in *The Miseducation of the West: How Schools and the Media Distort Our Understanding of the Islamic World*, ed. Joe L. Kincheloe and Shirley R. Steinberg (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004), 1–23.

they (i.e., Muslims on the news after attacks) wore the hijab, and Ayesha's friend wore the hijab, they must be the same people. Hence, the students questioned if it was "your people" behind these attacks. In other words, these students assumed Islam was a race. As discussed in the case of Noor earlier, this is another example where the racialization of Islam collapses ethnic, cultural, and racial boundaries into a racialized figure of the Muslim, which overlaps, not exclusively, with the figure of the terrorist.

Ayesha's friend's response is noteworthy, and speaks to the common experience of internalized Islamophobia. She mistakenly believed it was Afghans and not Arabs who were behind the attacks on 9/11, and so she reinforced the ethnic boundaries that separated her from them. She understood, probably based on media narratives and the political rhetoric at the time, that Afghanis were in some way involved in these events and she identified the supposed terrorists according to ethnicity and not religion. This episode demonstrated how there was a clear distinction in how a Muslim student perceived these attacks and the supposed perpetrators and how non-Muslim students reacted to the same events. The Muslim student perceived the perpetrators according to ethnicity because she was a Muslim and her belief system was incompatible with the acts of terrorism on September 11. Hence she clarified that it was not 'her people,' which in her view referred to ethnic affiliation. The perception of the non-Muslim students was quite different. They saw certain Islamic symbols, like the hijab, and understood these symbols as representative of ideologies and actions related to the terrorists and the 'Islamic race.'

Another student, Noor, described how her parents and those of some of her Muslim friends who wore the hijab had serious concerns for their daughters' safety at school in the aftermath of these attacks:

Noor: I have a friend who stopped going to school for some time because her parents were scared for her safety when she took the bus going to school. So she stopped. A few of them stopped I think. But because they didn't want to take off their hijab, so they just stayed home. My parents told me to take off my hijab right after 9/11 but as soon as I got out of the house I would wear it without them knowing. So I did wear it to school but I don't remember anything that happened.

Naved: So there were a lot of concerns for safety?

Noor: Yeah, the parents, mostly the parents were scared for their kids. You did hear about things that happened in the subway. Some people had their hijab taken off by other people, stuff like that.

According to Noor, parents of Muslim girls who wore the hijab had serious concerns for their daughters' safety after 9/11. The concerns, as expressed by Noor, were specifically over their daughters wearing the hijab. It would seem that these parents understood that the hijab was an Islamic symbol in the eyes of the public that signified sympathies or affiliations with terrorism, and that would make their daughters targets of violence. By continuing to wear the hijab immediately after the 9/11 attacks, parents were concerned that their daughters would be perceived as the 'bad Muslims.' In the aftermath of 9/11, Muslim women of all ages who took the hijab off may have been attempting to distance themselves from a certain negative perception about Muslim women who wore the hijab. Likewise, in an effort to protect themselves, many Muslims took to adjusting their outward appearance to fit the image of a more palatable Muslim: beards were shaved, Mohammad became Mo, American flags were hung proudly from front doors. Often, these acts were rooted in a climate of fear caused by the advent of government policies that policed outward expressions of Islam like the hijab. Hijab quickly became a fast-tracked ticket to extra security screenings at the airport, and it was implicated, along with other markers of religiosity, as a possible indicator for potential radicalization in programs to combat domestic terrorism.²⁴ In this way, hijab as a marker of a certain "type" of Muslim made it an important factor in the gendered effects of Islamophobia.

While Noor said she did not experience any problems, parents' safety concerns were not unfounded, as she pointed out some women were having their hijab pulled off while using public transportation on their way to school. The act of pulling off the hijab in the context of a supposedly multicultural nation and what it entails has been discussed at length by Hage.²⁵ According to him, the nationalist

²⁴ Sarah Reichenbach, "CVE and Constitutionality in the Twin Cities: How Countering Violent Extremism Threatens the Equal Protection of Rights of American Muslims in Minneapolis-St. Paul," *American University Law Review*, 69, 1989.

²⁵ Hage, *White Nation*.

subject expresses belonging to the nation in two different ways: ‘passive belonging’ and ‘governmental belonging.’ Passive belonging is the expectation of benefiting from the nation by virtue of being a part of it, whereas governmental belonging involves being in a position to manage the nation so that it remains uncorrupted. When people believe their nation is being contaminated by people who share a similar ideology as the perpetrators of terrorist acts (i.e., women wearing the hijab), nationalist subjects may take it upon themselves to enact their privilege of governmental belonging and purify the nationalist space by pulling off the hijab. And, as mentioned in the introduction to this paper, the act of unveiling Muslim women has its roots in the history of colonialism.

Media representations

Concerning stereotypes of Muslims perpetuated by the media, Tahir Abbas argues that “[t]he managed reality that is depicted by the media is transferred to society. When interacting with Muslims, Westerners will automatically perceive them as the stereotypes formulated by the media regardless of the way Muslim people actually are.”²⁶ In other words, the media is instrumental in forming perceptions of Muslims, even if this contradicts the actual beliefs and actions of the vast majority of Muslims. Amina believed the impact of popular cultural mediums, such as TV and movies cannot be understated:

That’s something that young people are most exposed to; TV, movies, you know, these are the type of things that they watch. Especially like movies, that’s where, you know, a lot of kids spend a lot of their extra free time, watching movies and their ideas do come from this type of medium. It’s not just something they’re reading about, it’s something they’re seeing. It’s a visual clip. Kind of a snapshot of what Muslims are.

Amina believed that the visual nature of film and television had a major impact on how Muslims were understood. Since Muslims are a minority in North America, members of the majoritarian culture may not have much exposure to Muslims and

²⁶ Tahir Abbas, “Islamophobia in the United Kingdom: Historical and Contemporary Political and Media Discourses in the Framing of 21st-Century Anti-Muslim Racism,” in *Islamophobia: The Challenges of Pluralism in the 21st Century*, ed. John L. Esposito and Ibrahim Kalin (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 63–76 (71).

Islamic beliefs. As such, television and films could possibly be important sites of knowledge production for students with regards to how they understand Muslims,²⁷ because according to Amina they provide a “snapshot of what Muslims are.” Stuart Hall has made similar claims through his examination of issues relating to race representation in the media. He believes that “media are especially important sites for the production, reproduction and transformation of ideologies.”²⁸ Ideologies, according to Hall, refer to “images, concepts and premises which provide the frameworks through which we represent, interpret, understand, and ‘make sense’ of some aspect of social existence.”²⁹ In other words, the media can influence how we construct our knowledge of various aspects of our lives. This is not to say that there is only one conception of race in the media which reproduces the dominant ruling class interpretation of the ‘Other.’ Rather, there are varying degrees of racist constructions that are reproduced through different mediums such as films, television shows, or news media. Racist portrayals in the media can be *overt* and at times more subtle through *inferential* racism. *Overt* racism in the media occurs when openly racist views are given legitimacy by people who are in the business of advocating a racist agenda. *Inferential* racism is a type of unconscious racism that stems from certain unquestioned assumptions embedded within the media.³⁰ Both these types of racism are operational in representations of Muslims in the media.³¹

Media representations of Muslims according to Maryam tended to be one dimensional characterizations that revolved around the archetypes of the ‘imperilled Muslim woman’ and ‘dangerous Muslim man,’ as Maryam stated:

They’re pretty much typecast [i.e., Muslims in the media]. I don’t really see them in American media besides things like terrorist plots or movies about

²⁷ Jack G. Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (New York: Olive Branch Press, 2001).

²⁸ Stuart Hall, “The Whites of Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media,” in *Gender, Race, and Class in the Media: A Critical Reader*, ed. Gail Dines and Jean M. Humez (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2011), 81–84 (82).

²⁹ Stuart Hall, “Racist Ideologies and the Media,” in *Media Studies: A Reader*, 2nd edition, ed. Paul Marris and Sue Thornham (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 271–81 (271).

³⁰ Hall, “The Whites of Their Eyes.”

³¹ Peter Gottschalk and Gabriel Greenberg, *Islamophobia: Making Muslims the Enemy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishing Group, 2008).

terrorism. So they're represented very one-dimensionally. And I never see Muslim families in everyday life going to school or things like that.

Maryam lamented how Muslims were rarely ever portrayed in the media as regular people doing normal activities in everyday life and being contributing members of society. This can be problematic as Hall argues that our understanding of race and the meanings that race carries are particularly constructed through the media. Hence, perpetuating these negative stereotypes could possibly impact how people in society and schools think of Muslims.

Ironically, after 9/11, mainstream media outlets saw an increase in more-or-less sympathetic portrayals of Muslim characters. In the years following 2001, a show that had a Muslim terrorist or homeland security threat, also included a patriotic Muslim, or a Muslim who helped thwart the terrorist attack. Sometimes, Muslims were even portrayed as victims of hate crimes or other attacks. Seemingly Muslim countries were given fictional names and could only be discerned by the way their people dressed, or the language that was spoken, in an attempt to avoid offending a specific nationality or ethnicity. But, as Evelyn Alsultany points out in her article on media representations of Muslims post 9/11, these tactics and portrayals did not help reduce the number of hate crimes, incidents of discrimination, or overall violence against Muslims in society; in fact, these trends only increased. At the same time, government policies against Muslims treated them all as suspects, seriously restricting their civil liberties, and US empire continued to expand into Muslim countries justified by the War on Terror. Alsultany argues that these continued oppressions were possible in part because of the "simplified complex representations" of Muslims in the media that projected an "enlightened culture that can distinguish between the good and the bad ones," but that ultimately perpetuated stereotypes just the same.³² Muslim women wearing the hijab often featured prominently in these narratives, and reinforced their objectification in society.

³² Evelyn Alsultany, "Arabs and Muslims in the Media after 9/11: Representational Strategies for a 'Postrace' Era," *American Quarterly* 65, no. 1 (March 2013): 161–69.

Eroticizing the Muslim female subject

Jennifer was also a convert to Islam from the majoritarian population. She was a mother of two and sometimes served as a volunteer at her children's school for various events. Jennifer shared her story of an encounter with a grandparent of one of the students at these events.

I was at the kids' school for Grandparents Day. That is when we invite all the grandparents of the kids from the school to come and experience a day in their grandchildren's school. The kids put on performances and shows. I was in the music room and we were having a book fair. All the grandparents were waiting in line with their grandchildren to buy them books from the book fair. There [were] a lot of people, about 100 people in a long line out the door. One of the male grandparents was with his wife and approaches me and says, "Do you have hair under that thing?" I smiled and said, "Yes I do." So he reaches behind me and grabs my scarf and my ponytail and yanks it. And he says, "Oh yeah, I can feel the ponytail back there." Then he turns to his wife and says, "Oh yeah she has hair under there." He says to me, "Why don't you just take it off," and motions with his hands, pointing up and down my body, "Why don't you take it all off?"

Jennifer's experience, like that of Noor's at the beginning of this paper, points to how donning a visual signifier of her Muslimness subjected her to a form of racialization. Despite being a member of the majoritarian culture, she was verbally and physically harassed for her perceived "Otherness" because she wore a hijab. Furthermore, she was treated as a sexual object. This objectification of the Muslim female body draws from a historical legacy of Orientalist perceptions that have cast Muslim women as eroticized objects of desire in need of saving by the civilizing European.³³ A similar incident was described by a young woman named Sana, who discussed her experiences with a male classmate at her school.

One day, a boy walked over to me in school and said, "Can I ask you a question?" and I said, "Sure." At that point, he asked me to do something I'd rather not repeat. It was a sexual act. It was sexually explicit. He said it right in front of a teacher and the teacher did nothing at all.

³³ Said, *Orientalism*.

Sana's story further highlights how the Muslim female subject's experiences with Islamophobia entail the sexualization of Muslim women. Sana was very cognizant of being targeted for both her religion and gender, as she mentioned,

Muslim women are very sexualized to the rest of the world. Because of media outlets, there is this perception of Muslim women being oppressed with no one to help them. At the same time there is this overly sexualized perception of women. The boys who were harassing me really relied on these two stereotypes. They hurled a lot of verbal abuse at me, phrases like b*****, whore; she's got a bomb; she's a terrorist. One day, while I was walking down the hallway...the boys spread their legs across the hallway. I normally wear skirts and dresses with jeans underneath; one of the boys laid across the hallway and tried to look up my skirt.

Overall, the types of physical attacks and aggression these Muslim women describe are, disturbingly, not unusual. Muslim women have been at the center of rising Islamophobic assaults—both verbal and physical—and these often include an aggression towards the hijab.³⁴ What is more, the specific attacks Sana describes in the last interview fit into a broader discussion on the sexualization of the hijab and of the Muslim woman's body more generally. From interpersonal acts of sexual assault and harassment like the ones in Sana's story, to popular culture trends that fetishize Muslim women who wear the hijab and subvert it in messages about sex,³⁵ these narratives are common. The contemporary obsession with the Muslim woman's body is a historically consistent one. The psychiatrist and philosopher Frantz Fanon once described French colonizers' frustration toward Algerian women who wore the headscarf:

...there is also in the European the crystallization of an aggressiveness, the strain of a kind of violence before the Algerian woman. Unveiling this woman is revealing her beauty; it is baring her secret, breaking her resistance, making her available for adventure...In a confused way, the European experiences his relation with the Algerian woman at a highly complex level. There is in it the will to bring this woman within his reach, to make her a possible object of possession. This woman who sees without

³⁴ See e.g., <https://www.villagevoice.com/2018/07/25/the-sexual-assault-epidemic-that-no-one-is-talking-about/>.

³⁵ See e.g., rapper French Montana's 2019 album cover featuring Muslim women in niqab and hijab: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20191002-is-french-montana-sexualising-the-hijab-or-liberating-it/>.

being seen frustrates the colonizer. There is no reciprocity. She does not yield herself, does not offer herself.³⁶

Although published in 1959, Fanon's words accurately reflect current discourses on hijab in the West, and, as a particular case study, in modern-day France. The ongoing debate on the hijab in France is a stark example of the sexualization of the veil and those who wear it. As Joan Wallach Scott describes,

Muslim modesty is taken to be sexually aberrant by French observers, who condemn it not only as different but as somehow excessive, even perverse...It was not the absence of sexuality but presence that was being remarked—a presence underlined by the girls' refusal to engage in what were taken to be the 'normal' protocols of interaction with members of the opposite sex.³⁷

Implied in French critiques of the hijab is a worldview that takes for granted that the visual appreciation of women's bodies is a natural process. By refusing to participate in this world order, Muslim women wearing the hijab are committing an act of aggression against society. In this way, hijab itself is seen as a critique of dominant gender relations.

Conclusion

This article examined the gendered dimensions of Islamophobia through North American Muslim women's lived experiences with Islamophobia while wearing the hijab. Through this ethnographic exploration, the emergent themes of: Islamophobia in societal interactions; within schooling contexts; in media representations; and through the sexualization of the Muslim female subject, helped to construct a nuanced and informed understanding of these lived realities. As this was a qualitative ethnographic study, our goal was not to interview a large number of participants to draw general conclusions about Muslim women's experiences in North American society. Rather, the purpose of our analysis was to shed light on some of the lived experiences of our participants, and in doing so contribute to the study and literature of systemic and interpersonal racism

³⁶ Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 43–44.

³⁷ Scott, *Politics of the Veil*.

experienced by racialized communities, particularly Muslim women who wear the hijab.

The story of the hijab in Western societies today cannot be divorced from the realities of Islamophobia. Conversely, the story of Islamophobia cannot be told without a special emphasis on the gendered ways in which it impacts Muslim women, particularly hijab-wearing Muslim women. To understand this relationship, it is crucial that we deconstruct the historical narratives about Muslim women and the hijab to understand how they are repeated in today's discourses. The stories in this paper analyze the experiences of Muslim women who wear the hijab in North America through various lenses. Through their stories, we can understand how the hijab is perceived as a racial construct, a sexualized construct, a cultural construct, and a national construct.