Hybrid Identities of Muslim Women in Canada
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Abstract
Drawing upon postcolonial theorizing, this study analyzes the discourses, evident in the popular press by secular and veil-wearing Muslim women. I explore how the women construct their own identities. I am particularly interested in examining whether they embrace binary oppositional frames and/or engage in their own interpretations. Through print and digital media articles from January 2010 – January 2013, I gained insights into the discursive constructions of Muslim women. My findings suggest that while some discourses embraced the system of binaries, in many cases constructions assumed a third space, transgressing dominant meanings.

Introduction
Since 2007, a number of controversies about the niqab (a veil worn by some Muslim women that covers all of the face except for the eyes) have sparked much debate in the Canadian media (See Appendix 1 for a listing of the most notable controversies). Courts and lawmakers have addressed issues around wearing the niqab while testifying in court, taking the citizenship oath, seeking essential public services (proposed Bill 94 in Quebec), at polling stations, and in the classroom. These policy moves have serious implications, creating potentially new boundaries to Muslim women’s ability to participate in public and organizational life (Golnaraghi & Mills, 2013). For example, the proposed Bill 94 could potentially deprive affected Muslim women of their rights to seek essential public services (such as education, healthcare, child care, etc.) or employment within government agencies in Quebec.

Muslim women face many significant barriers to labour market integration and discrimination due to the complexities presented by their gender, ethnicity, religion and immigration (Syed & Murray,
Policy moves such as Bill 94 not only send a dangerous message to the private sector (Golnaraghi & Mills, 2013), but also serve to put Muslim women at risk of missing social and economic opportunities (Choudhury, 2012). Construction of ‘Muslim women’ as a category is influenced by government as well as the media (Kirmani, 2009).

The construction of these women is influenced by colonial rule which has intensified in our post-9/11 context (Kirmani, 2009). A number of scholars have examined how contemporary constructions of the Muslim woman have their roots in the Orientalist (Said, 1979) obsession with the hijab (Prasad, 2012; Golnaraghi & Dye, 2012; Kirmani, 2009; Bullock, 2007; Yegenoglu, 2003). This obsession with the hijab as a signifier of oppression has intensified in the post 9/11 Islamophobia environment targeting Islam and its subjects (Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2008). “Islamophobia, can be understood as the fear of Islam, or its adherents, that is translated into individual ideological and systemic forms of oppression” (Zine, 2006, p. 9).

Orientalist discourse constructs Muslim women as an antithetical symbol to the rational, civilized and modern West (Said, 1979). Central to this discourse is the equation of the niqab and hijab with Muslim women’s oppression by Muslim men. In Canada, the most dominant discourses against the niqab privilege to a large degree a Western feminist discourse of gender equality (Golnaraghi & Dye, 2012; Golnaraghi & Mills, 2013; Bullock, 2007). Within the newspaper articles, the West’s construction of the Muslim woman entails common themes that describe them as oppressed, backward, and to be pitied (Golnaraghi & Dye, 2012). Muslim women represent a distinct and homogenous fixed category with a common identity and set of interests (Kirmani, 2009).

Using postcolonial theorizing from Said (1979), and Bhabha’s theorizing on hybridity (1994) as well as work by current postcolonial theorists (Prasad, 2012; Prasad, 2003, etc.), I am interested in exploring how Muslim women who live in Canada discursively construct their own identities. For
example, are dominant discourses about Muslim women reflected in their own narratives? This study will attempt to provide insights into the complex identities of Muslim women in Canada and their everyday negotiations. I am interested in challenging the homogenous and essentialized identities of these women, and instead surfacing the multiple ways in which these women speak about their identities. It is through understanding these new discourses that we can attempt to destabilize the universal and homogeneous notion of gender and identity within a local or global context. Further, such new understandings will support the argument for government and organizational policies and initiatives needing to recognize the diversity in Muslim women’s backgrounds and the dangers of privileging mainstream women’s perspectives (Syed, 2007).

The Context: Muslims in Canada

According to EuroIslam (2008) the Canadian Census recorded 13 Muslims in Alberta in 1871, marking the earliest migration to Canada. The first big wave of Muslim immigrants settled in Canada after World War II, resulting in a population of 33,000 by 1971 (EuroIslam, 2008). According to the 2001 Census, the majority of Muslim immigrants immigrated to Canada over the last 20 years (since the early 1990’s). The Muslim population today (940,000) comprises 2.8% of the Canadian population (Lewis, 2011). Today, the majority (approximately 98%) of Muslims settle and live in Ontario, followed by Quebec, British Columbia and Alberta. The majority of Muslims living in Canada identify themselves as South Asian, Middle Eastern, West Asian or North African (Hamdani, 2004). According to one account, Muslims in Canada represent over eighty-five countries and speak a range of languages (Riley, 2011). One study found the average age of Muslims in Canada to be 36.8 years old, with Muslim women and men more likely to have completed university education (compared to the overall population) (Adams, 2007).
The Muslim population is expected to triple over the next 20 years, representing 6.6% of the Canadian population (Lewis, 2011). This growth trends poses important considerations in a post 9/11 environment, where Muslims have been subject to increased levels of racism in Canada (Arat-Koc, 2006). A Leger Marketing poll for example indicated that approximately 50% of English Canadians didn’t feel Muslims share their values (Thompson, 2010). Islam and Muslims are seen as separate and ‘other’ whose values are incongruent. In an environment ripe with orientalist discourse and Islamophobia rhetoric, Muslims are portrayed in the Canadian media as “irrational, backward, bloodthirsty, amoral and ignorant” (Bullock and Jafri, 2000) and in the aftermath of 9/11 “terrorist” was added to the list of their attributes (Satzewich, 2011). The essentialist discourse has served to solidify Muslims into a fixed, monolithic category.

As the Muslim community continues to grow in Canada, the Muslim woman has become a powerful symbol of the clashes between ‘East’ and ‘West.’ The West’s fixation with the veil has a long and complicated history and continues to leave its imprint on contemporary discourses related to veiled Muslim women (Prasad, 2012). The Muslim woman is constructed as something that needs to be saved from her husband, brother and/or father and contained and at the same time as something that cannot be assimilated. This ambivalence is particularly problematic for Muslim women in Canada, who must live in a society that views the veil as violating Western values (Bullock, 2007) of secularism and gender equality. Mohanty (1998) questions the third-world (or Muslim woman in this case) as a homogeneous category arguing, against a singular assumption that all Western and non-Western women have identical interests. According to El Guindi (2003) this kind of Western feminism with a universalizing and homogenizing of interests, becomes “an alternative form of dominance that gives its men and women a sense of superiority” (p. 599). While feminist discourses define the niqab and veil as oppressive, others argue that the veil has become the embodiment of the Muslim woman’s
agency and has created an empowering space that combines notions of identity and resistance (El Guindi, 2003). According to Bullock (2007), Muslim women are a heterogeneous group who experience the veil in different ways and for different reasons.

**Destabilizing Orientalist Depictions**

A number of scholars have critiqued the Orientalist depictions of Muslim women and her veil (Golnaraghi & Dye, 2012; Bullock, 2007; Zine, 2007; Ruby, 2006; Hoodfar, 2003). These studies have documented “Muslim women’s experiences of veiling as a basis for calling into question the colonialist construction of these subjects as oppressed and subjugated by Islamic patriarchy” (Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2008, p. 420). These studies question the simplistic, homogenizing, and reductive stereotypes about Muslim women by illuminating the importance of choice and agency in how these women negotiate their own identities.

Golnaraghi and Dye (2012), for example, focus on colonial discourse within the popular press in Canada before, during and after the proposal of Bill 94 in Quebec. Their study uncovered a wealth of contradictions about the Muslim woman anchored in orientalist discourses constructing a range of identities while creating a dichotomous divide between the Orient and the Occident. Supporters of Bill 94 engage in a feminist discourse of gender equality, drawing on the power of oriental fantasies about the Muslim woman as imprisoned, oppressed and in need of saving (Prasad, 2012). While the system of hierarchy was very much evident within the discourses that pit Orientalist against Islamist representations, this study also found more nuanced reasons for veiling practices that served to defy these binaries.

Hoodfar (2003) in her study using narratives of Muslim women asserts similar findings as to why some Muslim women choose to wear the hijab. In her study, she found that many women chose to wear the veil despite objections from their parents. Haddad (2007), Bullock (2007), Ruby (2006)
and Martino and Rezai-Rashti (2008) found that for many Muslim women, veiling is a voluntary act with a multitude of meanings. Various studies have found pro-veiling discourses to defend veiling on a number of grounds including a demonstration of obedience to the tenets of Islam and modesty, devotion to Allah, and deflection of unwanted male attention. Another study of Muslim women in Canada found that the choice to wear the veil was hanging at the intersection of agency and assertion and cultural adherence (Atasoy, 2006). Ahmed (2005) in her study of hijab-wearing Muslim women suggests that these women are surfacing their “Muslimness” and resisting Orientalist discourses of inferiority and ‘otherness.’ Ahmed (2005) and Haddad (2007) found that the hijab has acquired new meanings in the United States (which are different from dominant meanings in the Middle East), where it has become a symbol of resistance, justice and anticolonial solidarity in a post 9/11 environment.

Mishra and Shirazi (2010) found that American Muslim women engage in individualistic interpretations of Islam when it relates to definitions of modesty and decision making in relation to their religion. They showed that Muslim women questioned Western commonly-accepted norms around drinking, dating, etc. and desired selective integration into mainstream American society. Mishra and Shirazi (2010) argue that these women actively negotiate their own identities, occupying a ‘third place’ (Bhabha, 1990) transcending binary categories. Khan (1998) used Bhabha’s (1990, 1994) notions of hybridity and third space in her accounts of the lives of two Muslim (one first-generation Iranian, the other second-generation of South Asian heritage) living in Canada. Khan (1998: 491-492) concludes that the daily negotiations of these two women “suggest a hybrid and dynamic notion of Muslim identity, a reality of the postmodern, postcolonial world.” Both studies serve to destabilize the Orientalist monolithic and homogeneous constructions of Muslim identity engaging in “a more open notion of Muslim culture as a multiple, shifting and contradictory site” (Khan, 1998, p. 492).
Many of the debates about Muslim women and veil take place in the context of media representations of Muslims (Satzewich, 2011). In a post-9/11 context, the media engage in a discourse of “hyperveiling” to exaggerate the salience of the veil and the Muslim woman (MacMaster & Lewis, 1998). The various veil controversies cited earlier in this paper have generated significant public debates and media attention. Golnaraghi and Mills (2013) and Macdonald (2006) findings support the “hyperveiling” discourse in the media as representations of Muslim women and the veil have intensified post 9/11. Both studies found that media serve to reinforce orientalist binaries of us and them by promoting an ambivalent discourse constructing the veiled Muslim woman as in need of saving yet at the same time a visible sign of Islamism and distrusted difference.

The Study: From ‘Binarism’ to ‘Hybridity’

A number of controversies about Muslim women and the veil have sparked considerable public debate throughout Canada, and are documented in the popular press. These debates provide a rich abundance of media texts for my study. In this study, I am concerned with teasing out the voices of secular, veil-wearing and niqab-wearing Muslim women in media articles written by journalists, as well as letters to the editor and opinion pieces. I will access print and digital media articles from January 2010 to January 2013 in Ontario newspapers.

I have selected Ontario, because this province represents the largest settlement of Muslim immigrants in Canada. I will access newspapers in communities with notable Muslim populations. The communities of focus for this study include Toronto, Mississauga, Ottawa, Hamilton, London, Windsor, and Kitchener/Waterloo. A total of nine newspapers were included (See Appendix 2). I conducted electronic searches of each newspaper, using keywords including ‘Muslim women,’ ‘veil,’ ‘niqab,’ ‘hijab,’ and ‘burqa.’ I then selected from the downloaded articles, those that included quotes/comments or written by Muslim women. A total of 102 articles were used for my analysis.
Using postcolonial theorizing on Orientalism from Said (1979), and hybridity and third space from Bhabha (1994), I am interested in exploring how secular and veil wearing Muslim women who live in Canada discursively construct their own identities. I am particularly interested in exploring whether these women embrace binary oppositional frames and/or engage in their own interpretations based on individual needs and situations. My intent is to provide insights into the complex identities of Muslim women in Canada, their everyday experiences, negotiations and choices.

Orientalism (Said, 1979) is a Western style of thought that constitutes a dichotomous or oppositional view of the West vis a vis the non-West (Prasad, 2012; Prasad, 2003). Prasad (2005) posits that such discourses “refer to an entire way of seeing, thinking and writing about the [non-West] and/or formerly colonized people” (p. 269). Through analysis of western bodies of knowledge that developed through the colonial encounter, Said (1979) and other postcolonial theorists found that Orientalism repeatedly constructs the West as developed, superior and modern, and the non-West or Orient as ontologically inferior, backward and archaic, requiring modernization, supervision, and guidance to become civilized. During colonial era, the Muslim woman and the veil were central to colonial discourse. Constructions of the veiled Muslim woman as oppressed were used as benchmarks for progress and modernization (Bullock, 2007). This “fixation with the veil and veiled woman has a long and complicated history which has left deep cultural imprints on contemporary … discourse of gender relations” (Prasad, 2012, p. 55) which continue to shape and inform contemporary discourses of the veil.

Within contemporary feminist scholarship the veil is seen as a symbol of submission and oppression of women (to men), and conversely as a symbol of resistance and empowerment against Western hegemony and sexualisation of women’s bodies (Bilge, 2010; Syed, 2010). Muslim feminists fall on different sides of this dichotomy with opposing views on their interpretations of the veil. Some
secular Muslim feminists interpret the veil as an example of religious fundamentalism (Islamism) and patriarchal oppression (Zine, 2006). Other Muslim feminists who do not interpret the veil as a religious requirement support the liberties of the Muslim woman in their choice to wear the veil, highlight the gender egalitarian themes within Islam and attempt to unread patriarchy from the various interpretations of the Quran (Syed, 2010; Zine, 2006).

Frenkel and Shenhave (2006) contend that over the last several years the binarism embraced by Orientalism has come under much criticism. While the critics see its political importance, they suggest that the use of “binary perspectives mask the hybrid nature of both the colonial encounter and the postcolonial condition” (Frenkel & Shenhave, 2006, p. 858). Orientalism draws on negative stereotypes that are fixed and static constructions of the ‘other’ (Bhabha, 1994). Conversely, anticolonial discourses that construct romanticized images of the Orient and the Muslim woman also contribute to constructing a homogeneous ‘other’ (Khan, 1998). These binaries act as contradictory poles in opposition, both essentializing the ideal Muslim woman (Khan, 1998). Zine (2006) argues that these binary interpretations are simplistic and counterproductive to Muslim women’s project. Bhabha (1994), critical of dichotomous models has shown that identity constructions do not always conform to binaries, and instead take ‘in between’ (or third space) the hybrid. The in between or third space becomes a space of “contradiction, repetition, ambiguity, and disavowal of colonial authority that does not allow for original signifiers and symbols of oppositional polarities” (Khan, quoting Bhabha, 1998). In this space there is nothing static or stable about hybrid identities, and instead differences without assumed or imposed hierarchy are entertained (Mishra and Shirazi, 2010). This third space allows for multiple critiques and articulations of oppositional discourses that surface unanticipated forms of agency and resistance.
The style of this paper also merits mention. My approach to this paper requires subjectivity and reflexivity (Martin, 1990). In so doing, the use of “I” and a personal tone is essential to this project (Martin, 1990). As a secular Muslim woman from the Middle East, who immigrated to Canada more than 30 years ago, I have lived my own complex journey in negotiating my own identity throughout my life. Since 2010 when Bill 94 was first proposed in Quebec, I have found myself at times frustrated, torn, and confused about the simplistic and reductive discourses.

On the one hand, I question the fixed and homogenizing assumptions made about Muslim women, which are rampant with stereotypes and biases. On the other hand, I also question certain interpretations of Islam globally which are sexist and patriarchal. Nonetheless, I often find myself engaged in dialogue attempting to offer a different perspective on the dominant discourses in the West that see Muslim women as oppressed. As I attempt to tease out the multiple voices in this study, I have chosen to include my own reactions and reflections in the concluding section as they are to me, an essential part of the journey and story. In this paper, I do not lay claim to an objective ‘truth,’ but instead offer a space for multiple perspectives and meanings that serve to destabilize binary views.

**A Matter of Choice?**

My data showed that most Muslim women, who don the veil, consider it a matter of choice. They believe that Islam requires modesty and by covering up they are acting upon valuable Muslim teachings, which bring them closer to Allah. According to Syed (2010) the Quran is quoted by Islamic scholars to highlight the importance of modesty and a code of conduct in terms of eye contact, dress, and walking style. Further, Quranic verses pertaining to female modesty have been addressed to the wives of the prophet Muhammad. According to some interpretations, these instructions are addressed to all Muslim women, while others see room for voluntary choice. More conservative interpretations take the word veil to also include face covering (Syed, 2010).
In addition to constructing the veil as a symbol of a commitment to Islam and Allah, the veil also offers respect, dignity, and controlling the unwanted gaze and attention to the body. My findings are similar to Golnaraghi and Dye (2012), Mishra and Shirazi (2010), and Bullock (2007) who found veiling has a multitude of meanings.

“Nazneen Zaidi of Kitchener said many people assume her husband controls her because she covers her head. Men and women are equal under the eyes of God and the law of Islam. Zaidi started covering her head as a graduate student. I loved it. It was respect and real freedom. You get to know me from what’s up here – (Monteiro, 2011a)

“When I dress this way, you are required to deal with me intellectually and that’s it. Abdulla views the veil as a strictly voluntary part of Islam” (Hendrix, 2011)

I wear it as it helps me to be a better person. It reminds me of my responsibilities as a Muslim. But I don’t think a garment in itself makes you good: I would never say that a woman is a veil is a better Muslim than one without. – (Rumbelow, 2010)

My findings are also in line with Ruby (2006) who found that the veil is a “tool that confers power and … helps many of [Muslim women] take control of their bodies … to set boundaries between themselves and the outside world” (p. 61). Whether to create boundaries between them and the public or the male gaze, veiling appears to assert power and resistance and freedom from undesired gazes (Ruby, 2006). Therefore, the Muslim woman sees the veil as liberating and empowering in different ways.

Those who identified themselves as Muslim women, who choose not to wear the veil, interpret the Quran and Muslim teachings differently. They see veiling as a cultural practice and not a religious one; they do not interpret the Quran as mandating hijab. Here, the view is held that the Quranic instructions apply solely to the Prophet’s wives and cannot be generalized (Syed, 2010). I found a faint few who supported their veil-wearing sisters in choosing to cover. My findings deviated from Mishra and Shirazi (2010) who in their study found that all unveiled respondents interviewed “upheld a Muslim woman’s right to wear the hijab” (p. 199). In this study, the overwhelming majority of
secular women in the media articles disagreed with the practice of veiling. A very strong and
dominant anti-veiling sentiment surfaced by secular Muslim women. What seems like a politicized
discourse constructed the veil wearing woman as manipulated by religious fundamentalism (Islamism)
and victim to deep-rooted sexism, patriarchal control and female subjugation which stand in stark
opposition to Canadian values (Ruby, 2006):

“Islam does not require a woman to cover her face – that the niqab must be worn is a
minority view held by a segment of the community whose values remain diametrically
opposed to Canadian values. The niqab for these groups is a political tool to enable
Islamism, for its artifacts to define Muslim identity in Canada.” (Hassan, 2010)

“The hijab is a brand for a political system, a live logo for radical Muslims to proclaim
their Islamist political system on free and democratic Western countries. Until Muslim
women assert themselves and take responsibility for their individual destiny, they will
sadly continue to be symbols to be defined and used by radical Muslims – (Loubani,
2012)

“The repellant notion that a bare-faced woman is a whore and brings shame not only to
herself but also to her family belongs to the repressive male-dominated communities of
backward societies. Yet, this has now reached the shores of Canada, where despite
knowledge that this isn’t a religious practice, the odd attention seeking female duped by
a newly politicized male of her community exercises the power to paralyze appropriate

Contrary to those women who construct the veil as empowering, these women see it as
inappropriate dress in Canada (Ruby, 2006). These quotes were predominantly from secular Muslim
women who had submitted opinion pieces as well as women representing secular Muslim
organizations such as Muslim Canadian Congress. These women construct veiled women as
“unconscious agents of their own manipulation at the hands of Muslim fundamentalists [Islamists]”
(Bilge, 2010, p. 17). Bilge (2010) suggests that these “cultural insiders” are privileged and legitimzed
by the media to represent veiled women as oppressed/alienated/manipulated in order to justify the hard
line government legislations to ban the veil.
**Asserting Her Identity**

Muslim-women engaged in pro-veiling discourses believe that it helps assert their identity. Wearing the veil in public is an act of courage and determination. For others, it is a way of asserting their identity by resisting assimilation, dealing with Islamophobia and racism. My findings were in line with Zine (2001) in that a number of women chose to don the veil in high school or University. My findings were also in line with Mishra and Shirazi (2010) in that in some cases, women chose to wear hijab despite family pressures to not veil. Consistent with Ahmed (2005) and Haddad (2007) women choose to wear the veil as a way of asserting their “Muslimness” to challenge stereotypes in a post 9/11 context. Ruby (2006) suggests that the practice of veiling in the West has become a pervasive symbol of Muslim women’s identity in the West, and a way to reaffirm their identity as Muslim. “For these women, the issue is not that they have to dress traditionally, but that they choose to embrace the hijab as a marker of their Muslim identities” (Ruby, 2006, p. 60). Here the decision to wear the veil becomes a symbol of strong Muslim solidarity, identity and resistance.

I do like challenging the stereotypes and letting people see me in a way they don’t think of Muslim women. Said Abassi, 34-year old woman – (Pensa, 2010).

For Muslim women in the US and Canada, the veil can serve as a sign of identity, a display of devotion and piety, or a statement of emancipation from the shallow objectification of women. In short, wearing the niqab can be an expression of central aspects of women’s personhood – (Kanji and Kanji, 2012)

“To me it became a political statement … people were calling us terrorists. I thought “I’m going to wear this in your face. This is my country. I was born here. My kids were born here.” (Giving up hijab painful; 2011)

In Canada, the hijab is often seen as a symbol of women’s oppression (Golnaraghi & Dye, 2012; Ruby, 2006). By taking the veil, Muslim women assert gender equality, resisting connotations of oppression. In coping with mainstream views of the veil as oppressive, Muslim women who engaged in pro-veiling discourses claimed that it is liberating (Golnaraghi & Dye, 2012). A strong agentic
discourse is evident where Muslim women who choose to veil, assert their ability to exhibit independent judgment (Mishra & Shirazi, 2010).

I am a Canadian. I am a liberated woman with my own thoughts, whims, desires and fears. But I also wear the face veil. This is my choice. No man coerced me into wearing it. In fact, some of the men in my community do not like my wearing it, out of fear that other Canadians will accuse them of oppressing Muslim women – (Aseefa, 2010)

Being a practicing Muslim woman I have never found my hijab to be “subjugating.” I feel just as liberated as any Western woman – even much more. Muslim women do not need your sympathy, we can speak for ourselves when need be – (Nargis, 2012)

Minna Ella, 35 who was born and raised in Canada has been wearing the niqab since she was 17. I don’t wear it because I’m oppressed. I have never felt oppressed except when I have to defend myself, and my dress, and my religion. (Canada’s Oath: one rule for everybody, 2011)

According to some scholars, the Quran promotes the notion of equal partnership between men and women, equal rights for work and compensation, and instructions that serve to project women’s rights (Syed, 2010). However, Islamic scholars suggest that the true meaning and spirit of Islam have been obscured by forces of context, history and ideologies of various Muslim societies (Syed, 2010). Thus, there is little agreement about the true message of Islam. Prasad (2012) reminds us that the veil has had a symbolic connection with Christianity and Islam. “In the Christian tradition of medieval Europe, the veil, via its association with the Virgin Mary stood for purity and virtue” (Prasad, 2012, p. 55-56). The following quotes reflect these interpretations:

It must be noted that covering the head is not oppressive or exclusive to Muslim women only. Head covering can be traced back to 13 BC in ancient Assyria (Mesopotamia), where women were required to cover their heads in public spheres for class reasons. Early Jewish and Christian women covered their heads a swell. As a society, we need to move away from such myopic thinking and learn from open-minded individuals – (Saliha, 2012)

It’s argued that the veil is a symbolic manifestation of gender inequality. This interference is rooted in a false association of inhumane cultural practices in various Muslim societies to the actual scriptural teaching. The concept of the veil as derived from the Koran ensures no derogatory symbolism can be attached to it. – (Inaam, 2011)
Islam was the first religion to allow women to vote, the right to divorce, and the right to be treated as equal to men – all now considered fundamental rights for women. Secular Muslim Woman – (Farooqui, 2012)

Coping with Public Degradation

Various studies have shown that mainstream media in the West construct the Muslim woman as not only oppressed, but also member of a backward religion that does not promote Western values. A number of scholars suggest that media representations of the growing stereotypes and Islamophobia are more visible since 9/11 and the Muslim woman has become a central symbol of a “terrorist” woman (Haddad, 2007; Ruby, 2006). In their study of discourses related to Quebec’s Bill 94, Golnaraghi and Dye (2012) and Golnaraghi and Mills (2013) found Western discourses of liberation seeking to save and rescue Muslim women from the niqab. Consistent with Miahra and Shirazi (2010), Ruby (2006) and Haddad (2007) I found numerous quotes by Muslim women who wear the hijab or niqab, who have been targets of public disparaging remarks. From being called names like “witch” and “terrorist,” to being urged to “go back to your country,” these interactions serve to define the ‘other’ as outcasts impacting identity constructions.

“They’ve come up to me and said: “you guys are all terrorists. You should go back to your own country” said Takroni, who was born in Egypt and moved to Canada with her family when she was seven.” (Davy, 2010)

Malikah Amatullah who wears a niqab – police stopped her on the crowded bus and told her to get off saying there had been a complaint about suspicious behaviour. What makes me suspicious, my clothing. – (Hendrix, 2011)

Hajera Khaja “I wear the hijab, the Muslim head covering, and have endured my fair share of stares, glares, and then some. There was a time when a passerby on the street yelled out “terrorist” and the time on the street car during evening rush hour when an elderly couple decided to acknowledge my presence loudly by conversing about how I dare wear that thing on my head, and don’t know I’m in Canada, not Saudi Arabia. – (Khaja, 2010)
I was surprised by the frequency with which these women report being the target of discrimination and confrontation. It is not surprising that they feel a sense of ‘otherness,’ thus creating an ‘us and them’ dynamic.

Maybe 20 percent of the time something happens, someone says something. But most people are fine. (Hendrix, 2011)

Lawendy said she feels discriminated against at least once a week, with people staring at her or making negative comments. (Lawendy, the principal of the Al-Huda Islamic school) – (Monteiro, 2010a).

It happens every day. I get strange glares all the time. I accept that. People make comments out of ignorance. It’s a daily dialogue. (Izra Al Thibeh, is a grade 12 student) – (Monteiro, 2010b)

“The stereotypes and discrimination have become so common that [veil-wearing Muslim women] are calling on [the Muslim community] to educate secular Muslims and their Western neighbours about Islam and the veil” (Golnaraghi & Dye, 2012, p. 26). Time and time again, I found references to Muslims needing to educate the ignorant. Several references were made within pro- and anti-veiling discourse to shed passive attitudes and “come out of Muslim closets” (Pagliaro, 2011b) and “our bubble world” (Scrivener, 2011) to generate more meaningful discourses about Islam and what it means.

As a human, living with people in this society, I think I should work harder to educate people about my religion. It seems like they are not educated enough. – (Attacker Sentenced, 2011)

Barea Sial, 17, who is enrolled at Wilfrid Laurier University said the Islamic faith is continuously defaced in the media. We are not what you see in the media, we are participating members in our community. – (Monteiro, 2011b)

Just as there are Muslims who claim that Islam permits violence to fight injustice, there are Muslims who assert that Islam supports or even demands non-violence. There are Muslims you argue that Islam requires gender equality. – (Kanji, S. & Azeezah, K., 2011)
Negotiating Personal Positions on the Hijab

What surprised me the most were quotes with stories about how Muslim women have negotiated their own position on the hijab, choosing to don the hijab, and then remove it in time or vice versa. These findings were most interesting as women negotiated and renegotiated their identities, suggesting hybrid shifting contradictions (Bhabha, 1994). Women who chose to remove their hijab predominantly did so because they were tired of being seen as a symbol of their faith and the entire Muslim community or their interpretations of what it means to be modest with the context of Islam changed.

Zarqa Nawaz said that many of her friends have stopped wearing the hijab. One friend said wearing it was like wearing the Miss American crown every day because she felt like she was representing her faith and her community by the covering of her head – (Monteiro, 2010c)

Everyone knew me as a muslim leader. Every issue was not a human issue, but a Muslim issue. I didn’t realize that the issues that affected everyone, child care, women, had been slipping away. I felt suffocated when I wore hijab. – (Giving up hijab painful, 2011)

“It was not the most important thing about me in every single situation. I didn’t want people to think they knew me because of the way I dressed. I’m accountable to defining who I am. – (Giving up hijab painful; 2011)

These particular quotes show how Muslim women engage in carving out their own individualistic interpretations of Islam. For example, for some the interpretation of Quranic instruction towards modesty changed. Some chose to no longer practice wearing the veil daily, but instead only to places of worship. Others felt that the veil no longer represented the Muslim woman they had become. Others questioned patriarchal practices and violations of human rights within their countries of origin, yet renegotiated their own space in Islam within a Western context.
Conclusion

This study shows how Muslim women in Canada discursively construct their own identities. I was particularly interested in exploring whether these women embrace binary oppositional frames informed by Orientalist discourse. In many cases, secular and veiled Muslim women collided over politically charged binary oppositional frames. In many cases, the secular women in the media articles “view the hijab as an unequivocal example of religious fundamentalism and patriarchal oppression and largely dismiss the views of Muslim women who wear the veil as a sign of modesty as ‘false consciousness’” (Zine quoting El Saadwi, 2006). Yet, these binary perspectives mask hybridity and draw out negative stereotypes.

Binary perspectives serve to maximize cultural distance between Canadian and Islamic communities, constructing attempts of assimilation and integration as not possible (Prasad, 2012). This notion indirectly blames, in this case, veil wearing Muslim women for the integration barriers they face. “The current discourse of the veil endorses the ideology of cultural distance by representing the veil as tangible evidence of an extreme form of otherness” (Prasad, 2012, p. 66). Not all secular women held this position. A faint few voices came out in support of Muslim women who wear the veil, asserting their agency and choice.

This study also shows that Muslim women attach different meanings to the practice of veiling. From different interpretations of modesty to a multitude of reasons for choosing to wear the veil, these women engage in highly individualistic behaviour. For example, when it comes to modesty, Islamic interpretations differed from choosing to wear the niqab and the hijab, daily, sometimes or not at all. This study also showed that for some women, these interpretations shift and change over time. Some women chose to don the veil later in life, while others chose to remove it as it no longer served them.
The study also showed that some women assert their identity through the veil to resist Orientalist discourses within a post 9/11 environment of Islamophobia. This conscious act of resistance marked a desire for selective assimilation or integration into Canadian society. Therefore, one cannot assume that Muslim women or communities are single, monolithic categories with few differences (Khan, 1998). What this study has shown is that these “identities shift as they slide, collide, transform, merge and separate from majority cultures and interact with multiple positions within Muslim communities” (Mishara & Shirazi, 2010, p. 205).

These findings have shown that identity constructions take a third space where differences are assumed and entertained. This hybridity may be seen as a form of resistance to Orientalist discourses that serve to convert, civilize, assimilate, and so on. This same hybridity calls on Muslim women to question and confront the “aspects of one’s own indigenous systems of gender” (Dube, 2002, p. 116). This same strategy does not conform to nor endorse binary perspectives that serve to silence and marginalize.

Over the last three years, I have reflected on my research on Muslim women and the veil and come to the conclusion that I am part of their lives and they a part of mine. My research and inquiry into the discourses have enabled me to privilege the “tensionalties” experienced by these women while locating my own struggles within these contexts (Clandinin et. al, 2010). My research has pushed me to push beyond these fixed binary perspectives to better understand how secular and veil-wearing Muslim women play an active role in negotiating and renegotiating their/our own identities. Mishra and Shirzai (quoting English, 2010, p. 205) argue “Third space is where we negotiate identity and become neither this nor that but our own.”

“Orientalist notions of the Muslim woman as synonymous with passivity must be challenged by notions of Muslim women as active agents of the third space” (Khan, 1998, p. 490). Prasad (2012)
shows that Orientalist discourses of the veil often spill over into workplace discourses, shaping immigrant identities, boundaries and rules of integration between the dominant and immigrant other. As such, deconstructing these discourses and creating a space for silenced voices may serve to diffuse rigid boundaries and spur equitable government policies and workplace practices.
## Appendix 1 – Niqab Controversies in Canada

### Year Niqab Controversy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Controversy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>A decision by the Supreme Court upholding a lower court’s ruling that a Canadian-Born Muslim woman may have to remove her niqab while testifying.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>A decision by the Supreme Court upholding a lower court’s ruling that a Canadian-Born Muslim woman may have to remove her niqab while testifying.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>The Quebec government introduced Bill 94 which, if passed, requires the face be visible during a person’s interaction with government employees when seeking essential public services (including education, healthcare, social services, daycare, etc.).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>An Egyptian woman was expelled from French language class when she refused to take off her Niqab.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>A decision by Canada’s chief electoral officer that voters wearing the niqab could cast their ballots, if they met certain conditions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>A decision made by Quebec's Chief Electoral Officer requiring the niqab-wearing voter to show her face at polling stations.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Appendix 2 – Newspapers included in the Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paper</th>
<th>Headoffice</th>
<th>Circulation</th>
<th>Selected Articles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Hamilton Spectator</td>
<td>Hamilton</td>
<td>Daily</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Record</td>
<td>Kitchener</td>
<td>Daily</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The London Free Press</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>Daily</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Mississauga News</td>
<td>Mississauga</td>
<td>3x per week</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Ottawa Citizen</td>
<td>Ottawa</td>
<td>Daily</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Post</td>
<td>Toronto</td>
<td>Daily (National)</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Globe &amp; Mail</td>
<td>Toronto</td>
<td>Daily (National)</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toronto Star</td>
<td>Toronto</td>
<td>Daily</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Windsor Star</td>
<td>Windsor</td>
<td>Daily</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References


Canada’s Oath: one rule for everybody (2011, Dec 15), The Windsor Star.


Lewis, C. (2011, Jan 1) Number of Muslims in Canada predicted to triple over next 20 years: study, *National Post*.


Riley, K. (2011) Violence in the lives of Muslim Girls and Women in Canada: creating a safe space for dialogue, research and reflection, London, ON.


Scrivener, L. (2011, Aug 7) “You can’t mistake A MISTAKE” You will be judged; the terrorist attacks of 10 years ago cast religion in relief – and drastically cranked up the anxiety amongst Muslims, *The Toronto Star*, p. N1.


