

Unveiled Sentiments: Gendered Islamophobia and Experiences of Veiling among Muslim Girls in a Canadian Islamic School

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The practice of veiling has made Muslim women subject to dual oppressions—racism and Islamophobia—in society at large and patriarchal oppression and sexism from within their communities. Based on a narrative analysis of the politics of veiling in schools and society, the voices of young Muslim women attending a Canadian Islamic school speak to the contested notion of gender identity in Islam. The narratives situate their various articulations of Islamic womanhood in ways that both affirm and challenge traditional religious notions. At the same time they also are subject to Orientalist¹ representations of veiled and burqa clad women that represent them as oppressed and backward. Focusing on ethnographic accounts of veiling among Muslims girls who attended a gender-segregated Islamic high school in Toronto, this discussion allows a deeper understanding of how gendered religious identities are constructed in the schooling experiences of these Muslim youth.

This discussion critically explores ethno-religious oppression encountered by Muslim girls in Toronto, Canada. Focusing on the experiences of Muslim girls attending a gender segregated Islamic school, the article critically explores how these young women reside at the nexus of dual oppressions, confronting racism and Islamophobia in society at large and at the same time contending with patriarchal forms of religious oppression in their communities. Islamophobia can be defined as “a fear or hatred of Islam and its adherents that translates into individual, ideological and systemic forms of oppression and discrimination” (Zine, 2003). For girls who adhere to Islamic dress codes, such as the hijab or headscarf, that visibly mark them as Muslims, issues of ethno-religious oppression in the form of Islamophobia are particularly salient. These Muslim girls construct their identities in opposition to the stereotypes they encounter in the media and in their public school experiences that portray them as “oppressed,” “backward,” and uneducated (Zine & Bullock, 2002; Haw, 1998; McDonough, 2003; Rezai-Rashti, 1994; Zine, 2000, 2002). While this study took place prior to the 9/11 attacks, is-

issues of Islamophobia were nonetheless salient and have since been exacerbated by that tragedy. Within this troubling socio-political context, Islamic schools continue to be safe havens where these girls find freedom from racialized and Islamophobic stereotypes (Zine, 2003). This discussion allows a deeper understanding of how gendered identities are constructed in the schooling experiences of young Muslim women, and examines how the multiple identities that they inhabit as social actors based on race, ethnicity, religion, and gender position them in marginalized sites within the racialized borders of diaspora and nation. This discussion situates the contested notion of veiling and gender identity in Islam and provides an examination of emerging discourses of identity among these young women that both affirm and begin to challenge traditional notions.

FRAMING THE RESEARCH: BRIEF OVERVIEW OF METHODS

This paper is drawn from a broader ethnographic study of Islamic schooling that focused on four Islamic schools in the Greater Toronto Area. The study was based on interviews of 49 participants, including students, teachers, school administrators, and parents, as well as 18 months of fieldwork from September 1999 to August 2001 including classroom observations and action research conducted while teaching in an Islamic girls' high

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school. This paper focuses on the data gathered among Muslim girls in a gender-segregated high school.

Several themes emerged that help frame the experiences of these girls, both inside and outside of school. These are discussed through a narrative analysis of ten female students who attended the Al Rajab² high school. They ranged in age from 16–19 and were from South Asian, Arab, and Somali backgrounds.

As a Muslim scholar and feminist who wore the hijab or headscarf for 15 years as a form of marking my faith and identity, the issues explored have both personal and political significance. The discussion that follows examines the politics of veiling from a historical and discursive purview and then examines some of the lived experiences of veiling among the young women in this study.

CONTEXT OF ISLAMIC SCHOOLS IN ONTARIO

Recent figures from the Ontario Ministry of Education reported 2,240 children attending Islamic schools in 1999, but estimates from the Muslim community suggest that there are as many as 4,000 students enrolled (Scrivener, 2001). Students are often added to waiting lists from birth, and some Islamic schools have waiting lists of 650 students or more. In Toronto and the surrounding areas there are 18 full-time Islamic schools and a total of 35 across the province of Ontario. With the exception of one school that belongs to the Shia tradition, all of these schools are part of the Sunni tradition in Islam. These two groups comprise the predominant sects within Islam.

The school featured in this discussion was one of over 20 full-time Islamic schools in the Greater Toronto Area and accommodated students from K-12. The school was gender-segregated from grade four, and the high school had separate sections of the building designated for girls and boys. Gender segregation and the construction of gendered spaces within Islamic schools, such as separate lunchrooms, classrooms, and prayer areas, is common in Islamic school settings after children reach the age of puberty when religious codes for modesty in dress, manner, and social distance between members of the opposite sex become instituted. In addition to the physical barriers that separate boys and girls socially at this time, the Islamic dress code for girls, which also becomes operative by the age of puberty becomes another means of segregation and marking the shift to womanhood with greater emphasis on the seclusion of their bodies.

GENDERING ISLAMOPHOBIA

Central to the analysis of Muslim women and girls in Western diasporas is the notion I refer to as “gendered Islamophobia.” This can be understood as specific forms of ethno-religious and racialized discrimination leveled

at Muslim women that proceed from historically contextualized negative stereotypes that inform individual and systemic forms of oppression. Various forms of oppression, for example, racism, sexism, and classism, are rooted within specific ideological/discursive processes and supported through both individual and systemic actions. In the case of gendered Islamophobia, the discursive roots are historically entrenched within Orientalist representations that cast colonial Muslim women as backward, oppressed victims of misogynist societies (Hoodfar, 1993; Said, 1979). Such representations served to justify and rationalize imperial domination over colonized Muslims through the emancipatory effect that European hegemony was expected to garner for Muslim women. These stereotypical constructs have maintained currency over time and have served to mark the borders between the binary spaces of the West (read: progress, modernity) and the East (read: illiberal, pre-modern) as irreconcilable halves of a world living renewed relations of conquest and subjugation.

Beyond representational politics the epistemic violence behind these constructs bears material consequences for Muslim girls and women. Studies that highlight the impact of gendered Islamophobia have shown that Muslim women who wear hijab suffer discrimination in the workplace (Parker-Jenkins, 1999). For example, a recent study in Toronto, identified significant barriers to veiled Muslim women accessing jobs (Keung, 2002; Smith, 2002). This study reported that 29 of the 32 Muslim women surveyed indicated that they had an employer make a reference to their hijab while applying for jobs in the manufacturing, sales, and service sector. Twenty one of the participants were asked if they could remove their head covers, and one third had been told at least once that they had to remove their veils if they wanted a job. Two sets of women were sent “undercover” to apply for the same job, bearing relatively identical resumes, age, and ethnic backgrounds, the only difference being that one of the women wore hijab. While 62.5% of the women without a head cover were asked to fill out a job application, only 12.5% of the women wearing hijab were given the same opportunities. These examples show the nature of gendered Islamophobia as it operates socially, politically, and discursively to deny material advantages to Muslim women.

BANNING HIJAB IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS: CASE STUDIES FROM FRANCE AND QUEBEC

In another example of gendered Islamophobia and mounting fears of religious fundamentalism infiltrating secular institutions, Muslim girls in France, Turkey, and Quebec have been exiled from public schools on account of their hijabs (a phenomenon the media dubbed “hijabophobia”). The hijab was viewed as an assault on dominant civic values of female liberty and a denial of the dominant national identity (Misbahuddin, 1996). These

debates emphasize that balancing multicultural pluralism and religious freedom is a fragile act. A case in point is the French controversy known as *L'affair du foulard* or "affair of the scarf." The situation first became prominent in 1989 when three Muslim adolescent girls were denied access to public school because they wore the hijab or headscarf, an act that defies a 1937 French law prohibiting the wearing of conspicuous religious symbols in government run schools. The *L'affair du foulard* ignited debates over nationalism and the perceived threat of growing ethno-racial and religious diversity. Against this political backdrop, right wing French politician Le Pen continued to urge the repatriation of all immigrants who had arrived in France since 1974. Such xenophobic sentiments were echoed in the conservative newspaper *Le Point* where a provocative headline read: "Should We Let Islam Colonize Our Schools?" (Gutmann, 1996, p. 161).

The debate over secularism and religious freedom that ensued over this issue divided even the left in France where some socialists allied themselves with conservatives who were defending the 1937 law. Those on the left who defended the law did so on the grounds that "the veil is a sign of imprisonment that considers women to be sub-humans under the law of Islam" (cited in Gutmann, 1996, p. 161). Many feminist responses also did not challenge this assertion, and instead supported the notion that the hijab is a symbol of gender inequality, and therefore incompatible with the ethos and values of French society. (El Habti, 2004) However, such stereotypes deny the agency of Muslim women who wear the veil, and reduces the multiple meanings associated with the veil to a single negative referent. Therefore in the public debates that took place, the *L'affair du foulard* evoked troubling discourses of fear, aversion, otherness, and even sub-humanness in relation to Muslim girls and the veil that overshadowed the fundamental issue of religious freedom as a human right.

Within the Canadian context, the case of Emilie Ouimet captured national attention in 1994 when 12-year-old Emilie (a French Canadian convert to Islam) was expelled from her school for not complying with a request to remove her hijab. The largest teacher federation in Quebec supported this move by voting in favour of keeping the hijab out of French schools. The principal at Emilie's school justified his decision by saying that the wearing of a distinctive sign like the hijab or neo-Nazi insignias could polarize the aggressiveness of students, thereby equating the hijab with facism and invoking a discourse of fear and repression. The social, cultural, and political context in which the hijab ban erupted was critical in understanding these debates. In 1977, the passing of Bill 101 decreed that all immigrant children in Quebec had to attend French language schools. This law effectively changed the homogenous character of French schools and rapidly ushered in a new multicul-

tural dynamic to these schools (Lenk, 2000). Therefore the backlash to integration and ethno-racial diversity underscores the contestations over religious dress in secular public schools.

Emilie's case also unfolded amidst a growing French nationalism in Canada and the veil came to epitomize the challenge of defining a distinctive Quebecois national identity in a changing social and cultural environment. The French and English media were polarized in their representation of the issue and used the forum to further the broader contestations over the nature of French society and hegemony in Quebec (Lenk, 2000; Todd, 1999). The English language newspapers became the champion of Emilie's cause citing the need to value individual and human rights. Representing the Anglophone minority in Quebec who also were subject to Francophone hegemony, the English language press capitalized on Emilie's plight as a way to further their own political critique of French society and the failure of Quebec nationalism to conform to the laws of English Canada's discourse (Lenk, 2000). So in this political context, the hijab was not only a way of constructing the Islamic other as a threat to liberal civic values but it also polarized French nationalism with Anglophone federalism.

Lenk (2000) reminds us that an important racialized dimension to the debate was the fact that Emile was a white convert to Islam. She argues that Emilie's Islamization was viewed as racial transgression, making her less sympathetic to the French nationalist constituency. As a result, she became racialized through her refusal to conform to the normative cultural standards and perform the dominant identity. It was seen as a disavowal of her dominant Francophone Quebecois identity and thus a threat to the French nationalist goal of developing a "distinct society" with a French character.

Lenk (2000) further points out the critical fact that news media widely excluded the point of view of Emilie herself and failed to include the voices of other Muslim women in the debates. Therefore the fact that Emilie's control over her body, dress, and ultimately her schooling career were compromised by the ban became almost incidental to the broader social and political issues that framed the debates. This unequal representation also was evidenced by the fact that while Muslim women's views were silenced from the media and public discourse, a white female reporter received much attention when she decided to put on the hijab and write about her "experience" (Lenk, 2000). Throughout the media representation, political analysts and even the school principal who initiated the ban provided the dominant narratives on this issue to the exclusion and appropriation of Muslim women's experiences. In the end, however, Emilie was able to recuperate her agency and her religious rights by appealing to Quebec's Human Rights Commission, which ruled that public schools cannot forbid the wearing of religious headscarves (Khan, 2003). These

landmark human rights cases represent gendered Islamophobia at play in the negotiation of gendered religious identities in secular educational sites.

THE POLITICS OF VEILING

Driscoll (1997) argues, “both men’s and women’s bodies are important sites of cultural and religious inscriptions; yet these markings have particularly devastating consequences for girls and women” (p. 93). Here she is speaking to the issue of how patriarchal standards of bodily acceptability drive women to self-denial and cosmetic augmentations through the “violence of narcissism” that results in new cultural permutations of the female body that she describes as “the slender or starving body . . . the tattooed body, the surgically corrected body . . . the self-slashed body,” to name a few (p. 94). In this way, Driscoll articulates a notion of the body as a “cultural medium upon which is inscribed the politics of gender” (p. 94). Indeed the politics of gender can be mapped upon the bodies of women in various ways. For example, Muslim women’s dress is one modality that provides a salient form of culturally and religiously encrypting the female body. For example, El Guindi (1999) notes that as a form of religious dress, the Muslim veil, the hijab, is located at the intersection of dress, body, and culture (p. xvi). Through the medium of the veil therefore, Muslim women’s bodies are gender-coded and form a “cultural text” for the expression of social, political, and religious meanings.

Corporeal Inscriptions: Multiple Meanings of Veiling

Hoodfar (2003) argues that dress codes, such as the Muslim veil, serve significant social, cultural, and political functions, acting as a medium of non-verbal ideological communication. Clarke (2003) also describes the function of Islamic dress as a significant means of communicating social and religious values. From these understandings, we can conceive of the body as a site of variable inscriptions that visually mark and code religious, cultural, and gendered norms or, conversely, resist and subvert these norms. Such corporeal inscriptions, meanings inscribed upon the body silently, communicate social and political messages through specific forms and styles of dress. Through this process of social communication, meanings are mapped onto the body as it is presented and packaged for public consumption and spectacle. As a form of social communication and bearer of cultural and gendered norms, the Muslim veil is one of the most provocative forms of dress, eliciting as many diverse and conflicting reactions as there are reasons ascribed to its adoption as a distinctive dress code for women.

Despite the often static representations of veiling, there are multiple meanings associated with the veil that vary historically, culturally, and politically (Bullock, 2000, 2002; Hoodfar, 1993; Kahf, 1999; Zine, 2002). Although women’s practices of veiling predate the Islamic context, this symbol has entered into the popular imagination in Western societies as the quintessential marker of the Muslim world and as a practice synonymous with religious fundamentalism and extremism. In this conception, the bodies of veiled women operate as cultural signifiers of social difference and social threat and represent fidelity to a patriarchal order, which is a danger to women’s autonomy (Bullock, 2002; MacMaster & Lewis, 1998; Read & Bartkowski, 2000). These notions can be traced back to their Orientalist origins where depictions of veiled Muslim women in the colonial imaginary ranged from oppressed and subjugated women, to the highly sexualized and erotic imagery of the sensual, yet inaccessible, harem girl (Alloula, 1986; Bullock, 2000, 2002; Hoodfar, 1993; Kahf, 1999; Mabro, 1991; MacMaster & Lewis, 1998; Said, 1979; Yegenoglu, 1998; Zine, 2002). Therefore, historically, the veiled Muslim woman has been simultaneously constructed as an object of fear and desire. Muslim women’s identities are negotiated within the nexus of these ambivalent constructs that mediate between the desire and disavowal of their social, racialized and gendered difference (Khan, 2002; Zine, 2002).

In some contemporary Muslim societies, the veil has been used as a form of political protest and class-based signification (Bullock, 2002; Hoodfar, 2003; MacCleod, 1991). In its symbolic and practical form, the veil also is regarded as a means of maintaining the body as a space of “sacred privacy” or being hidden from public view in accordance with religious prescriptions (El Guindi, 1999).

Remarking on the variability of the veil as a cultural signifier of difference, Todd (1999) notes:

Clearly the *hijab* is no innocent “signifier” within such a volatile context. It has come to symbolize everything from Islamic fundamentalism, religious expression, women’s subordination to women’s empowerment and equality. (pp. 441–442)

Therefore as a political and discursive space, Islamic dress represents a mode of gendered communication that implicates how the body is narrated, read, and consumed both cross-culturally and within specific religious and cultural frames of reference.

The Veil in Religious Paradigms: The Hermeneutics of Dress

In a scriptural sense, the veil has been interpreted as a Divine injunction based on specific verses from the Qur’an and supported by some hadith³ literature that provide a historical documentation of the words and

deeds of the Prophet Muhammed. For example, in the following Qur'anic verses addressing women's clothing, it is stated:

And say to the believing women that they should avert their gaze and guard their modesty, and they should not display their adornment except what is apparent thereof, and they should throw their veils over their bosoms, and not display their adornment except to their husbands or fathers. (Holy Qur'an 24:31)

O Prophet, tell your wives and the women of the believers that they should bring some of their cloaks closer/nearer to themselves, that is a minimum [measure] so that they would be recognized as such and hence not molested. (Holy Qur'an 33:59)

During the 7th century in Arabia when these verses were revealed, the customary pre-Islamic practice of women was to wear a long headscarf (khimar) that flowed loosely around their shoulders and left their breasts exposed. Some scholars view the verses related here as a corrective to this practice and as a means to signify Muslim identity (Abou El Fadl, 2001; Hajjaji-Jarrah, 2003). Significantly, there are no sanctions in the Qur'an for not covering, and in a survey of relevant hadith literature related to dress Clarke (2003) notes that only one report in the canonical collections clearly refers to the requirements of women's covering. In this tradition, it is related that the Prophet Muhammed stated that at the age of puberty, women should cover all but their hands and face. Yet Clarke points out that this hadith is found only in a singular collection and that this is not considered a strong account since the isnad or chain of transmission between various historical narrators had been broken and therefore the account cannot claim an unqualified validity.

Given the complexities of interpretation and the divergence between scholars who invoke literal versus historically contextualized readings, there is no juristic consensus among scholars as to the areas of the body to be covered (Roald, 2001). These range from the extreme of covering the entire face according to some of the early Islamic legal schools, to covering everything but the hands and face. Still other interpretations note that since the Qur'an does not explicitly state the mandate of covering the hair (rather it refers to drawing the veil over the bosom), that this is not a requirement and that maintaining a dress code that is in accordance with the contemporary social and cultural norms of modesty is all that is required (Hajjaji-Jarrah, 2003).

Both the Qur'anic verses and references within the hadith narratives have been subject to rigorous re-examination by contemporary scholars who have presented alternative contextualized readings. Some argue that the hijab is a historically specific form of dress that was used during the 7th century as a means to visibly mark Muslim women so that they could be identified as

being under the protection of the Muslim clan and therefore avoid being molested or harassed (Abou El Fadl, 2001; Hajjaji-Jarrah, 2003; Roald, 2001). The veil also was the marker of a free woman versus a slave or concubine and set certain social and sexual parameters for the engagement of men with these different social and class-based categories of women (Hajjaji-Jarrah, 2003). These interpretations offset other religious views that situate the hijab as a static symbol of religious practice and as a means for the social and legal demarcation of women's bodies as being part of private, non-public space. This has concerned feminist scholars who rightly see this understanding as contrary and detrimental to the Islamic ethos of equality and justice, and as a sociological and ideological factor that has arrested the development of true gender equity among Muslim populations (Ahmed, 1992; Mernissi, 1987, 1991).

VEILING AS FEMINIST PROTEST OR FUNDAMENTALIST DOGMA?

As an Islamic feminist construct, the veil represents a means of resisting and subverting dominant Euro-centric norms of femininity and the objectification of the female body and as a means of protection from the male gaze (Bullock, 2000, 2002; Read & Bartkowski, 2000). As a sexually politicized referent, the veil has been identified as a symbol of the rejection of "profane, immodest and consumerist cultural customs of the West," making it an anti-imperialist statement marking alternative gendered norms (Read & Bartkowski, 2000, p. 398). These notions construct the practice of veiling as a part of an oppositional political discourse that counters the "tyranny of beauty" that objectifies and commodifies women for the edification of patriarchal capitalist desires. In this way, wearing the veil is viewed by some of its proponents as an empowering move that represents a feminist stance for resisting the hegemony of sexualized representations of the female body. Halstead (1991), for example, notes that such rationales have contributed to the saliency of the veil in the British Muslim diaspora:

The Qur'anic requirements of modesty and decency in dress (Qur'an 24:30-31; 33:59) may be seen not so much as an exemplar of patriarchal domination as a practical attempt to defeat sexual exploitation and harassment, and as such it continues to be upheld by many second generation British Muslim women. (p. 274)

However, this notion places the burden of responsibility for avoiding sexual harassment upon women, who are expected to regulate their bodies to avoid eliciting the negative sexual attention of men, rather than placing the onus on men to regulate their behaviour toward women.⁴

Therefore, in very reductive ways, narrations of Islamic womanhood, both inside and outside of Muslim

ideological and ontological conceptions, have been intrinsically connected to religious attire. On the one hand, conservative Islamic discourses view the veil as a primary determinant of religiosity for women and unequivocally reject other articulations of female identification that do not include the veil as a legitimate constituent of Islamic womanhood. Many secular feminist readings of the veil also use equally reductive paradigms to essentialize the veil as the universal marker of women's oppression, negating veiled women's alternative constructions that locate the practice within spaces of social, sexual, and political empowerment (Lazreg, 1988, 1994; Mohanty, 1991). Muslim women must therefore navigate between these reductionist and essentialized paradigms to claim their own representation over the discursive practices that determine the way their bodies are narrated, defined, and regulated.

Identifying the locus of the body as a significant site of social control and regulation, Driscoll (1997) argues, "Our bodies are marked by the current cultural forms and norms by which the self, femininity, masculinity and desire are produced, not by way of ideology but by virtue of the manifold ways our bodies are organized and regulated" (p. 95). Therefore what lies beyond the ideological determinants that underpin the socially constructed notions of gender and faith is the way in which corporeal practices, such as dress codes, are regulated within patriarchal systems of power. Driscoll describes how the mechanics of this regulation operate through the way the "rules and regulations" of culture are written on women's bodies. In a Foucauldian sense, these mechanisms of social control operate to construct "docile bodies" that are subservient to the aims of specific structures of power and cultural authority.

In Islamic societies, Muslim women's bodies are regulated through the vicissitudes of patriarchal social rules on the one hand and secularist reforms on the other. Whether the veil and burqa⁵ is a mandated form of dress for women in Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Afghanistan, or if it is outlawed in secular public institutions in countries like Turkey, the effect is essentially the same; namely that these practices of disciplining and regulating women's bodies are imposed by state authorities and thereby challenge the political and spiritual autonomy of Muslim women to make reasoned choices about their bodies. Therefore, the hermeneutics of the veil as a religious dress code creates a varied discursive terrain where multiple meanings, fears, and desires converge.

VEILING PRACTICES IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND ISLAMIC SCHOOLS

For Muslim women and girls who adopt Islamic dress codes, such as the hijab and niqab (face-veil) and wear abayas (long overcoats), these markers of Islamic iden-

tification often lead to social ridicule and ostracism in Western societies (Hamdani, 2004). Negative stereotypes and discrimination relating to Islamic dress codes were among the most salient concerns the girls interviewed had in their day-to-day secular experiences. Yet Muslim girls also must contend with how their dress codes are regulated within the Muslim community. Case studies of Muslim girls attending North American public schools and Islamic schools find similar tensions with respect to their veiling practices. In an ethnographic study of hijabat⁶ Yemeni school girls in Dearborn, Michigan, Sarroub (2005) describes the complex ways in which they negotiate the liminal "in-between" spaces between home and community and the dominant mainstream culture in school as "sojourners" between two worlds. Navigating between the conservative orientations of their community and the challenges of secular public schooling Sarroub, using data from 1997–1998, documents the cultural interface within one school as these Yemeni students seek accommodations for their dress codes in physical education classes and attempt to maintain their traditions of gender-based social distance among members of the opposite sex by avoiding physical contact, such as shaking hands, or otherwise "mixing" with boys.

My earlier research examining Muslim students in secular public schools in Canada also examined similar issues of accommodation and negotiation relating to Islamic dress and lifestyle and the resistance strategies employed by students to achieve inclusion (Zine, 2000, 2001). The issue of racism and discrimination also were noted in the schooling experiences of these Muslim high school students. In particular Muslim girls wearing hijab described how their interactions with teachers were often framed by negative Orientalist assumptions that they were oppressed at home and that Islam did not value education for women (Zine, 2001, see also Rezai-Rashti, 1994). Such notions were often communicated through the hidden curriculum and through low teacher expectations and streaming practices where some Muslim girls noted that they were encouraged to avoid academic subjects and stick to lower non-academic streams.⁷

While Islamic dress was a site of negative attention and challenge in public schools and in Canadian society at large, within Islamic schools hijab was mandatory. The dress codes at the Islamic school involved in this study included a compulsory hijab and burgundy coloured abayas or overcoats worn over street clothes. These dress codes were considered to be the school uniform for the girls and were enforced by school authorities. Boys also attended this gender-segregated school but occupied separate areas in the school building. They wore grey pants and white shirts as a school uniform. Male religious head covers in the form of a cap or toque, known as kufis, were optional. The compulsory nature of the hijab for girls was due to religious prescription

as a matter of modesty, whereas for boys, the cap was a sign of Islamic identity and encouraged, though not mandated.

Outside of school, the girls were free to dress as they chose or in accordance with family expectations. For many of the girls, wearing hijab was a choice that they made as part of their expression of Islamic identity and modesty and as an act of worship. These girls wore hijab outside of school as well. Some also wore abayas over their clothes outside of school, although many wore their hijab with other clothes, such as the South Asian style shalwar kameez⁸ or western-style clothes that conformed to traditional Islamic dress requirements and were loose fitting and opaque. None of the girls reported being forced to wear hijab outside of school by their families and took it up out of their own religious conviction, yet many girls in the school chose not to maintain these dress codes outside of school.

In addition to the regulatory practices within the school where their dress codes were subject to surveillance by the school authorities, the girls also were confronted with pressures outside the Muslim community where the veil has come to represent a marker of backwardness, oppression, and even terrorism (see Zine, 1997, 2001). This form of discrimination, Islamophobia, punctuates the experiences of many Muslim girls and women within Canadian mainstream society. The following section draws on ethnographic data to explore Muslim girls' experiences of "gendered Islamophobia" and then continues to examine the experiences of Muslim girls who contend with the dual oppressions of sexism within their communities, and racism and Islamophobia outside.

UNVEILED SENTIMENTS: GENDERED ISLAMAPHOBIA AND LIVED EXPERIENCES OF VEILING

The Muslim girls in this study had to contend with the negative stereotypes regarding hijab outside school and the regulation of their dress within the school. Each situation became a challenge to agency and identity. The following narratives explore the experiences of Muslim school girls with respect to instances of gendered Islamophobia outside of school and the politics of veiling both outside their schooling experiences as well as within the discursive parameters of religious identification enforced within the school.

Aliyah, Nusaybah, Zarqa, and Imrana were grade 11 students at the Al Rajab Islamic school. All are 16 years old and of Pakistani descent except Aliyah who is Afghani. The topic of Islamic dress entered the conversations often, particularly when we spoke of their experiences outside of school and of why they liked being within an Islamic school environment. During one conversation where we talked about who wore their abayas

home and who took them off, experiences of racism, xenophobia, and gendered Islamophobia were revealed as the girls explained the situations they encountered journeying to and from school. Most of the high school girls regularly used the public transit system and it was there that their encounters with people were often negatively punctuated by racist, xenophobic, and Islamophobic attitudes. In the following exchange these issues are revealed as the young women speak poignantly about how this discrimination impacted their sense of self and identity:

Aliyah: Truly, I don't wear my abaya home. Honestly I take it off.

Nusaybah: And I go home with mine on.

Aliyah: Because the thing is, you take your car. I take the TTC,⁹ see, and people look at me and they see me, and sometime I'm treated rudely, seriously. Just with the hijab, sometimes I'm treated rudely.

Jasmin: By whom? The passengers or the bus drivers?
Aliyah: The passengers *and* the bus drivers. Okay, like once this man, a passenger on the subway, called me an illegal immigrant. I think he was drunk. And I told him, "I'm here legally! I didn't come here illegally! I came here legally!" Another time, I was wearing the hijab and I was standing right in front of the bus door, like I made it to the door but the guy [the driver] still shut the door on me and he drove off! And if I hadn't been wearing hijab I think he would have stopped.

Researcher: Do you notice a difference when you go out without the abaya?

Everyone: [talking at once] "Very much, yeah. *Very much!*"

Zarqa: Okay, I was going on the bus one day in Ramadan and I was wearing my hijab and my abaya. I was going to take off my abaya, but then I didn't. And we were going past 5th St. and there was this lady on the bus right, and there was a little girl and she was really, really cute and I love children, and I was like, "Oh hi, she's so cute!" and her mom, she, like, looked at me and she turns the daughter away from me, and the girl just started crying. It makes you feel so bad!

Aliyah: It makes you feel like, "Oh if I hadn't been wearing this!"

Zarqa: That's exactly what I thought! The minute I saw that, it was in my mind—I should have taken it off! Like, I know I shouldn't, but at the time it made me feel that if I took it off it'd be different. It'd be like—the girl wouldn't be crying.

Aliyah: It's true. So many people do that. Like, if you look at their kid and you'd be, like, smiling

at them, they'll just give you the dirtiest look, like: "Don't look at my kid!" But then when some white lady looks at their kid, they're, like, smiling back at the lady.

Other girls in separate interviews also recounted similar experiences of being called "illegal immigrants" and harassed on buses and subways with comments like "Halloween's over!" Many girls reported the same incident at a bus stop outside the school where the bus driver would often close the door on them and drive off.

As the girls exchanged their stories of the lived experience of racism and Islamophobia, it became clear that these were patterns that they had all encountered as the result of having their bodies marked as Muslims through the practice of veiling. The veil located them as "foreigners" who did not belong to the Canadian social fabric, and the xenophobia they encountered cast them as "illegal immigrants," a tantamount denial of their citizenry. Being subject to this open hostility created a fragile narrative of "Canadianness" and belonging for these girls that was easily ruptured by the lack of social acceptance they encountered in mainstream society. These were also experiences of social rejection, of being excluded from the simple banal exchange of smiling at a child, and being treated as "persona non grata" simply because of their religious identity and the negative meanings imposed on the veil. Within these encounters, a specific discourse of "foreignness" and Otherness emerged and framed the way in which they came to see their identities as Muslims being socially evaluated and ultimately rejected. This positioning wove its way into their narratives of identity and implicated how they located themselves within the racially bordered spaces of nation.

In Canada and other Western societies, the identities of Muslim girls converge on the matrix of race, ethnicity, and religious difference and create a nexus of interlocking oppressions that position them as subaltern subjects (Khan, 2000; Zine, 2002). As diasporic communities within the broader national narrative, Muslim identities hinge on the multiple hyphens that demarcate their ethno-racial (i.e., South Asian, Arab, African, etc.), religious (i.e., Muslim) and national (i.e., Canadian) identities. Yet these multiple identities also create distance from the dominant society by accentuating specific degrees of racial and religious difference. The white, Eurocentric, secular cultural codes of Canadian society are the standard of measure against which all other identities are judged and positioned and within which all other identities must be disciplined into conformity or face exclusion (Henry & Tator, 2005). Therefore the non-white racial-ness and Islamic Otherness of these young Muslim women meant that politics of race, ethnicity, and religion were inextricably linked and woven into their lived experience and often negatively implicated their encounters within the dominant society.

CONFRONTING STEREOTYPES

The girls felt they had to represent Islam everywhere they went and that they needed to be careful of what they said or did since their behaviour would be essentialized to represent all Muslims. These issues emerged in my interviews with Safia, Sahar, and Umbreen. Both Safia and Umbreen were South Asian of Pakistani and Indian descent and Sahar was a Palestinian Arab. The following discussion shows the scrutiny and surveillance that was placed upon them as young Muslim women and how they negotiated the burden of representation and negative essentialism. The discussion is particularly salient in the post 9/11 world, however it needs to be kept in mind that these interviews took place prior to 9/11 and yet the issues of being collectively labeled as "terrorists" was still a strong concern for Muslim youth:

Safia: There's so much pressure, especially for the female Muslims, because if we make one little mistake, the littlest mistake, they'll keep that as a stereotype about us and they'll make us look bad about that. Yet if another girl did it that, didn't wear hijab, or wasn't Muslim, it wouldn't be a bad thing for her. Yet for us we're, uh . . .

Sahar: Looked at greatly—

Safia: From every single point.

Sahar: Exactly.

Safia: So that's why we have more pressure on us outside in public to act modest and respectfully with everyone. Even if, say a stranger came up to us and started acting rude right? If we responded back rudely to them, they would say, "Oh look she's so rude!" this-and-that, but they wouldn't remember that they started it. So that's why even if someone's rude on the street or whatever, I'll still give them respect just so they can't say, "Oh, Muslims are this-and-that."

Umbreen: Yeah, but if one Muslim does something, they'll think all Muslims are like that. Everyone is like that. They'll be like, "Oh look at these Muslim people. They don't have any shame, blah blah blah." But then when they do it, it's an everyday thing. It's like, "Oh who cares?" Yeah, like if a white man goes and kills someone they don't go and say *all* white men killed someone. They don't say "Oh my God *all* white men kill people!"

Sahar: Exactly.

Safia: But if it was ever on the news that a Muslim man killed someone—

Samia: They'd spend years on it!

Safia: It'd be on the news forever.

Umbreen: And then Muslim people feel like more uncomfortable on the streets.

Safia: And you think everyone's looking at you and they're thinking, "Oh my God, this person's going to kill me!"

Sahar: "Oh God, terrorists!"

Jasmin: It's sort of more of a burden because you know your entire community is going to be judged.

Sahar: But here [in Islamic school] you come and they know it's not like that, so you feel more comfortable and more relaxed and freer and more open.

This discussion seemed to foreshadow the burden of collective guilt leveled against the Muslim community worldwide based on the actions of 19 terrorists during attacks in New York, Philadelphia, and Washington on September 11, 2001. The realization that any actions by Muslims would be held against everyone who shared the same faith (some 1 billion worldwide) was seen as inevitable by these young women. They took proactive measures to ensure their own behaviour would not be negatively essentialized to pathologize other Muslims, by monitoring their actions and consciously avoiding reacting to "rude" behaviour leveled at them by others.¹⁰ They were acutely aware of the double standards imposed on them as racialized Muslims and that "white people" did not have to contend with similar stereotypes and essentialized labels based on the actions of individual members of their group. Even without the spectre of September 11th as a reference point, the Oklahoma bombing and the blame initially cast on alleged Arab/Muslim terrorists as the culprits was not far off in the collective memory of the Muslim community, particularly since local mosques, such as the one down the street from the Al Rajab school had received bomb threats as a result. The Muslim community also noticed that a white, Christian, American man, Timothy McVeigh, was eventually found guilty of the heinous crime, yet this had no bearing on how other white, Christian, American men were perceived or treated as a result. The double standards were clearly evidenced as the entitlement of white privilege that allowed white Americans to escape unscathed from the actions of their fellow citizens in ways that racialized communities were unable to do. These understandings served to build a consciousness of marginality and the politics of race among these young Muslims.

NEGOTIATING THE DISCURSIVE NORMS OF DRESS

Muslim girls entering the discursive spaces of Islamic schools are socialized to conform to the prevailing religious orientation within the school and must, therefore, accommodate to the social and institutional norms that impact on the construction of their gendered subjectivities. Therefore, while Muslim girls resist the way they are positioned within popular culture and Islamapho-

bic representations, they accommodate to the prevailing discourse of "hijab-equals-piety" within the school and mosque community thereby exchanging one form of discursive representation and control (i.e., Orientalist) for another (i.e., religious/patriarchal). They therefore script their identities within and against these competing constructions, at various times resisting or accommodating themselves to these discursive positionings. For many, accommodating to the gendered norms of the school was very much in sync with their own orientation to their faith and their religious sensibilities. Reay (2001) refers to this acknowledgment as a process of "discursive recognition" or "feeling a better fit with one discourse than another" (p. 155). Therefore, for many women, these dress codes are taken on as a matter of conscious choice and spiritual freedom.

Without a doubt, some young women did contest the policing of their dress in Islamic school, but recognized that it was being upheld as the standard school uniform as well as being seen as religious injunction. However, as these young women develop greater political maturity and knowledge and gain the ability to act and engage within the space of Islamic discourse—where such issues are the subject of debate—they may just as legitimately choose to re-define their notions of Islamic identity and identification in alternative ways. As spiritually-centered young women, the majority of those interviewed chose to express their faith within the acceptable norms determined within their Islamic school environment, although these boundaries were often challenged. Nevertheless, their notions of Islamic identity, were largely constructed within the prevailing discourse produced by the school and local religious authorities. Among the young Muslim women in this study, these discursively and physically regulated aspects of identity were either validated and upheld or openly contested.

Freedom, Sisterhood, and Articulations of Identity

Interestingly, although these girls attended a gender-segregated Islamic school, they actually reported feeling more "segregated" in public school since the lack of acceptance of their faith-centered lifestyle and religious dress meant they were set apart and more socially isolated from other students. Being in an Islamic school gave them a stronger feeling of freedom in expressing their religious identities without fear of ridicule or social exclusion (see also Haw, 1995).

Not having to conform to standards of dress that are dictated by MTV and the popular styles of youth culture allowed these girls to feel freer to express their identity in a more modest fashion that was in accordance with their faith-centered orientation. While Islamic school also mandates conformity with a particular form of Islamic

dress, this was more congruent with the kind of sensibilities these girls had already inculcated based on their religious convictions and the way they articulated Islamically-appropriate styles of dress. Without the peer pressure to conform to more popular and less modest forms of clothing, they felt a greater sense of “fitting in” to the school environment. Girls reported that in public school there was a great deal of social pressure to take off their hijab and be like everyone else. Iman, an OAC student of Somali descent, discussed the peer pressure she and her friends encountered while wearing hijab in public school:

I was wearing hijab and you know people ask too many questions. They'll be like, “Why do you wear that on your head? Aren't you hot?” You'll feel kind of bad. You'll answer them and they'll be like “take it off” and stuff like that . . . because, they want to look like their friends. They don't want to be different. They don't show pride in themselves and the faith that they have.

For Iman then, hijab represented pride in her faith and identity as a Muslim woman. She had started wearing hijab in middle school and because she did not have many Muslim friends, she felt pressured to take it off. Some friends, she reported respected the fact that she chose to wear hijab and when she later transferred to a school where there were a higher percentage of Muslims in the school wearing hijab, she felt more comfortable, and safe in expressing and living her Islamic identity.

Competing Constructions of Femininity

Deviating from the dominant discourses of sexualized femininity by wearing hijab and observing more modest dress codes meant situating oneself outside the socially accepted norms of behaviour and dress for girls within mainstream public schools. For the Muslim girls interviewed, this was an act of resistance and non-conformity that often resulted in exclusion and social isolation. Yet this type of peer pressure is another powerful form of social control that levels sanctions against transgressing the socially constructed norms and expressions of feminine identity. Girls who did not subscribe to the latest fashions and did not wear revealing clothes to attract male attention were operating outside of the dominant discourse that regulated the representation of the female body.

Swimming against the tide in this way was exceptionally difficult given the social conditioning and limited narratives available to young girls in developing their identities. The normative standards of femininity that were made available to young Muslim girls were already discursively marked and produced within the dominant Eurocentric paradigms. They had either to accommodate to these articulations of identity, or to challenge and resist the positioning of their bodies in this way.

According to Jones (1993):

Girls perceive (in their wide observations from media, family, everyday life) the positions—including the silences—available to “normal” women, and usually regulate their own desires and behaviours within those parameters. This is not simply false consciousness which can be altered with some feminist education; it is not a choice between being liberated and being oppressed. Rather it is a choice between being “okay” or “normal” and being “weird.” (p. 162)

In the same way, the construction of normativity related to Muslim women's identity as it was articulated within the social and discursive boundaries of the Muslim community, was based on conformity to a homogenized religious and social identity that was imbued with the weight of religious authority and Divine sanction, and was therefore not open to social negotiation in the view of many religious leaders or school authorities. Despite the fact that there are competing viewpoints on the “legitimate” articulations of Muslim women's identity (see for example Bullock, 2002; Khan, 2000), the views that are more challenging to the conservative status quo interpretations of gender issues in Islam, are often marginalized and invalidated by patriarchal religious authorities (Abou El Fadl, 2001; Barlas, 2002; Wadud, 1999).

In Islamic schools, Muslim girls confront a more conflicting set of standards for femininity and womanhood than those they encounter in public school. The normative standards of hegemonic religious views on gender, faith, and identity circumscribed their choices for expressing their sense of self and womanhood in radically different ways than did the secular, though also powerful, discourses of femininity in public schools. However, many girls found the Islamic constructions more conducive with the way they articulated their own sense of religious identity and gender, than the prevailing discourses of femininity they encountered in public schools. For example, from a feminist standpoint, they were opposed to the sexualization of women in popular culture and media and felt that this objectification of women detracted from being taken seriously for their intellect or spirituality. They embraced the veil as a marker of identity and act of worship, but also appreciated the way in which it gave them control over the male gaze.

From this standpoint, Muslim women take ownership of the veil as a means of regulating visual access to their bodies and limiting unwanted male sexual attention that they feel detracts from other aspects of their identity and selfhood. On the contrary however, it can be argued that the emphasis placed on covering the female form in effect limits the construction of women's bodies to a singular sexualized referent. In other words, the act of covering the body as a means of protection from the male gaze, also constructs women's bodies as solely sexual objects

that need to be guarded and hidden so as not to attract sexual interest or attention.

The extent to which some girls attached their identities so intrinsically to the practice of veiling was disturbing. For example, Zarqa's reaction to my question regarding what it meant to be to be a Muslim was an immediate reference to veiling:

I think it [being a Muslim] means to cover yourself. The main thing is to cover yourself, because um—where did I read it? A woman is a jewel. And when I hear Islam I think it's the most religious culture . . . I never used to see ladies wearing niqab and abayas and hijab and scarves. And now I see them so much. Like, I see them everywhere, like, on buses. And when I see that person, I see "that lady's Muslim." But you can never tell if you're not wearing hijab.

Zarqa highlights the visibility of the hijab as a marker of Islamic identity and applying the rationale often heard in lectures in the mosques about women and hijab, that a woman is like a precious jewel that one conceals because it is so valuable. This notion is further emphasized in the following remark by a Muslim woman participating in a recent study of Muslim veiling in North America:

A woman is not a commodity or an object, but she is like [a] precious pearl. The oyster is the hijab that covers and protects it from the dangers of the sea. The pearl remains pure and untouched by any corruption. But it is the brutal nature of mankind that strips this treasured gem from its covering and places it for display or sells it for a price. (McDonough, 2003, p. 110)

Arguing powerfully against the commodification of women's bodies in society, this speaker nevertheless seems oblivious to the fact that she may be trading one discourse of subjugation for another, as her view is rationalized by a similar attempt to regulate women's bodies and sexuality to suit a different set of patriarchal norms and expectations. Whether the intent is to exhibit women's bodies in order to satiate the male gaze or to cover women's bodies in order to inhibit male desires, both realities force women to cater to specific patriarchal demands.

Nevertheless, the veil-as-resistance discourse (Bullock, 2000, 2002; El Guindi, 1999; Read & Bartkowski, 2000) presents a more empowering contrast to other views of hijab that see women's bodies as causing fitnah (discord and chaos) in society and that mandates that their bodies and the sexuality they exude, must, therefore, be disciplined and covered from the male gaze. Read and Bartkowski (2000) for example argue that rationalizations of veiling that liken women to jewels and precious objects are rhetorical strategies that invert traditional gender hierarchies privileging masculine qualities and attributes over feminine ones.

For them this inversion leads to "women's inherent difference from men is perceived to be a source of esteem rather than denigration" (p. 402). Yet both views can be challenged for the limiting ways in which they narrowly reduce Muslim women's identities by the practice of veiling.

By conflating the saliency of the veil, these discourses also reduce religion to its extrinsic elements, placing less emphasis on inner spiritual development. There is, for example, no social policing of women's or men's engagement in more vital acts of worship such as attending to regular prayers. Prayer is one of the five pillars of Islam and viewed as central to Islamic practice; yet maintaining this practice is left to individual regulation and seen as part of a Muslim's private sphere. Women's dress, however, is part of the public sphere since the hijab is only worn in situations where women are in the presence of men outside of their immediate family. Therefore within this public/private dichotomy, the maintenance of hijab is subject to greater social control than the maintenance of prayers, which are of higher religious significance. There is, therefore, a sad irony to the various ways in which religious practices are regulated and how this regulation is differentially applied within the context of gender.

CHALLENGING GENDERED ISLAMAPHOBIA

Muslim girls were consciously and actively challenging some of the stereotypes that governed the way their identities were represented. In my own schooling experience as an undergraduate university student, I recall an anthropology professor who, after I had spoken out forcefully on a particular issue being discussed in class, remarked that he was "surprised" that I spoke so strongly since he expected me to be very "shy and demure." It was obvious that his assumption was based on the way that he read my body at the time as a veiled Muslim woman and the negative meanings and connotations with which my body had become discursively inscribed. Muslim women were not "supposed" to be intelligent, forthright, and outspoken, and therefore my speech created a dissonance in the mind of this professor who saw me from the perspective of dominant stereotypes that rendered me as "oppressed" and without voice or agency.

Some Muslim girls in the Al-Rajab school also were challenging these negatively essentialized constructions. In particular, when I was teaching in the Al Rajab Islamic school, I had arranged for some of my students to make oral presentations to the rest of the school in an assembly. We were examining women and migrancy and the sexual violence and harassment that many female refugees often face when they flee their homelands. Rehana, a 19-year-old student of Pakistani descent, delivered a powerful speech that addressed issues of rape and gendered

violence. As she was preparing, I asked her if she felt comfortable speaking about these issues since the assembly would include male students and teachers. Rehana reassured me that she did not feel it was problematic for her to raise these issues since she felt strongly that they needed to be addressed and we could not afford to be shy about it. She reported that her mother had some concerns over the content of her speech, which she argued was necessary for her to make, since as a “niqabi”¹¹ it was always necessary for her to engage in ways that would challenge people’s preconceptions of her:

My mom said “Why do you have to talk about this?” And I’m like, no, you have to be open about what you want to say, or else you are just like the stereotype: quiet, you just see two eyes, you don’t see anything else. But you have to go against the stereotype!

The type of gendered Islamophobia that Muslim women encounter, therefore structures particular counter-responses that openly challenge these constructions.

Muslim girls, therefore, face multiple challenges within the constructions of their gendered identities, being subject to patriarchal forms of regulation relating to their body and dress within the Muslim community, on the one hand, and negative stereotypes and gendered Islamophobia within mainstream society, on the other. Within the competing paradigms that dogmatically attempt to structure their identities, these young women struggle to determine a sense of agency, spirituality, and belonging within the discursive parameters of faith, community, and nation. These young women consistently located their strength and resistance within a framework of faith. Creating an alternate space for the articulation of Muslim female identity that resists both patriarchal fundamentalism and secular Islamophobia is a contemporary challenge for Muslim women negotiating the complex epistemological and ontological terrain of race, ethnicity, religion, and gender. By centering the voices and struggle of these young Muslim women, we can begin to see them as actors who at times reinforce traditional norms and at other times act in ways that begin to redefine the terrain of gender, faith, and identity.

NOTES

1. Orientalism refers to a set of discursive relations and practices that structured colonial relations between Europe and its Muslim colonies. Through Orientalist discourses, “the Orient” comprising the Middle East and Asia was constructed as a barbaric, anachronistic space outside of the progress and civility of European modernity. These colonial narratives served ideologically to rationalize and justify European expansion and exploitation within Muslim lands as part of the “white man’s burden” to civilize the savage races. Orientalism still maintains currency within the Western imagination and serves to legitimize more contemporary neo-imperialist practices and to

maintain positional superiority of the West in relation to Islam and Muslim societies.

2. All school names and participant names are identified using pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of participants.

3. Hadith refer to the sayings of the Prophet Muhammed and, next to the Qur’an, form the primary corpus of Islamic knowledge providing guidance for daily life as well as the moral and ethical basis for Islamic legal codes.

4. The idea of the “dangerous feminine” is evoked in some Islamic discourses that regard women’s bodies as sites of temptation that are in need of containment. Mernissi (1987) describes this the result of a belief in the passive nature of female sexuality versus the active notion of male sexuality, placing the burden upon women to avoid provocation by employing restrictive dress codes and seclusion.

5. Burqa refers to a long cloak or overcoat worn by some Muslim women.

6. Hijabat is a plural feminine noun denoting the cohort of girls in Sarroub’s (2005) study who all wore the hijab or headscarf.

7. Academic “streams” in the Canadian context are the same as “tracks” in American schools.

8. A shalwar Kameez is a traditional South Asian form of dress which consists of a long tunic worn over baggy trousers.

9. The term “TTC” is used as an acronym by Torontonians to refer to the public transit system of buses, subways, and streetcars known as the Toronto Transit Commission.

10. A qualitative study of Muslim schools in Montreal conducted by Kelly Spurles (2003) also echoes these sentiments in the words of a participant who stated, “We know they—the media and the rest of society—are watching us for the slightest proof that we are as bad as they think” (p. 58).

11. The term niqabi is used among Muslim women to refer to women who adopt the niqab or face veil.

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