

**ISLAMOPHOBIA AND ‘OTHERING’: NARRATIVES OF
INTERNATIONAL HIJABI MUSLIM WOMEN IN
HIGHER EDUCATION**

by

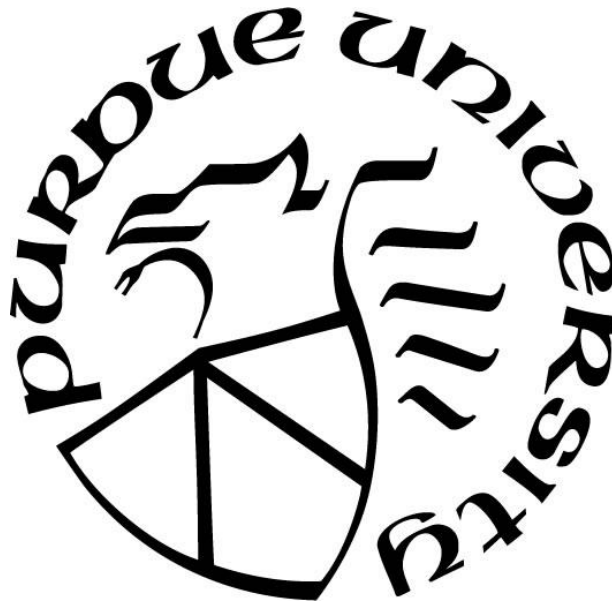
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A Dissertation

Submitted to the Faculty of Purdue University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy



Department of Curriculum & Instruction

West Lafayette, Indiana

May 2019

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For My Family

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are many people whom I would like to thank for their tremendous support during my time at Purdue University. First and foremost, I would like to express my utmost gratitude and appreciation to my advisor Dr. JoAnn Phillion for her guidance, unconditional support, and patience throughout my graduate studies. Without her support, this work would not be possible. She continues to inspire me both as a human and a scholar. I would also like to extend my special thanks to Dr. Burdick, Dr. Ciftci, and Dr. Zywicki for serving as my Ph.D. committee members and for their meaningful comments and constructive feedback throughout.

Second, I would like to thank my co-researchers for courageously sharing their life stories with me with the hope of providing the general public with some insight into what it means to be a Muslim woman in this context.

Third, I am indebted to my friends whose splendid friendship and constant encouragement inspired me to continue even when the times were tough. Moreover, my fruitful collaborations with my C & I fellows taught me to become a better researcher. I also thank all the staff in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, the friendly environment they have created made being a graduate student such a great experience.

I would also like to express my genuine gratitude to my fiancé Amir Rashidinejad for his unconditional support through the ups and downs of this research. I could not have done it without him. Last but not least, I owe the completion of this stage of my life to my parents, as I do the rest of my accomplishments. Words cannot express the deep appreciation that I hold in my heart for their genuine love and support throughout my life. Anything I say will be an understatement of their care, support, love, and encouragement. I am forever grateful for all they have done for me.

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ABSTRACT

Author: Karimi, Nastaran. PhD

Institution: Purdue University

Degree Received: May 2019

Title: Islamophobia and 'Othering': Narratives of International Hijabi Muslim

Women in Higher Education

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Historically, various minority groups have faced multiple forms of prejudice and discrimination. The sources of such attitudes are mainly ignorance about these groups. One such group is Muslims living in western countries. The fear and dread of Muslims and Islam has deep historical roots; however, these attitudes escalated after the September 11 tragedy. Prior to September 11, 2001 Muslims were an unnoticed minority group in the US. After September 11, Muslims became the headlines of news and Americans were exposed to distorted images of Muslims in the media. This misrepresentation of Muslims in the media led to yet another form of xenophobia, which resulted in 'othering' Muslims. In schools and universities, the story was not different. In the following study, I discuss the 'othering' of 6 international hijabi¹ Muslim women studying at a Midwestern University in light of the Islamophobic tendencies developed after September 11. I create narratives of these experiences to understand how hijabi Muslim women make sense of their experiences in relation to the larger sociopolitical discourse. These narratives contribute to the larger effort of creating an equitable educational experience for students from all backgrounds.

¹ Hijab is the head cover worn by Muslim women.

CHAPTER 1. ESTABLISHING COMMON GROUNDS

Introduction

This chapter is an invitation to a journey. A journey that began with a puzzle before I set foot in the US. A puzzle that included pieces of personal encounters with mistreatment, disrespect, and othering. As I entered the US, started my academic career, engaged with critical scholarship, and learned more about the historicity and sociopolitical nature of my experiences, I began to conceptualize a research study that would assemble these puzzle pieces. This puzzle includes the lived experiences of international hijabi Muslim women in relation to the context they live in, the history that gave birth to their experiences, and the politics that inform them. The following chapter chronicles my journey of mapping this puzzle with the collaboration of my fellow research companions. I first detail several personal experiences that became constant question marks as I navigate life in the US. I also share how these questions led to and motivated my research study.

To gain a deeper and more meaningful understanding of these experiences, I explain the Middle-Eastern and American contexts that play a role in the formation and perpetuation of these questions. I focus on the Middle-East, my birthplace and the birthplace of my research companions, in which our home countries reside. I broadly discuss the religious, political, and ethnic landscape of the Middle-East to provide a general background of where we come from. I also explain the US, as it is the context in which we live in and the study takes place. For the US context, I delve into the history of its relationship with Islam, Muslims, and predominantly Muslim countries from the early days of Islam to the present day. I broadly explain the historical, religious, and sociopolitical discourses of these contexts in order to create a common ground for where,

when, why, and how this research was conceptualized and conducted. Lastly, I provide a preview of the subsequent chapters of this journey.

The Inception Story

The inception of this research predates my arrival to the US, though I did not think about it in theoretical research terms at the time. From scheduling my visa interview appointment, to the long Dubai embassy line at 5 a.m., and the interview itself, my journey has been a series of hurdles and challenges. I initially anticipated that my circumstances would change after my arrival to the US. This was a misconception on my part. The long international flights queue at the JFK airport, the dumping of citizens from certain countries on the side of the airport's main lobby, the heightened security measures, the never-ending, repetitive questions, the long wait, and the multiple fingerprinting were signs of a larger, deeply-rooted historical and sociopolitical phenomenon. While the actual procedures were exhausting, frustrating, and infuriating, my main source of anger was the implications of such procedures: the meanings, labels, and burden implicitly being placed on me. My invisible security tag read as follows in a large, bold, and red font: *potential threat, security alert, terrorist, dangerous, and untrustworthy*. These designations reminded me of the warnings used to transport hazardous material. I felt like hazardous material.

While this extreme undertone of potential danger did lessen over time, it never faded away entirely. This was not my first experience living abroad. I had previously lived and studied in Australia and England. I was relatively fluent in English, and my disposition was not one of a traditional Iranian; whatever this might mean. According to many of my friends, I was actually too *khareji*, mainly referring to being too Western in attitude—again, the exact meanings of these distinctions elude me. Moving to the US did not seem like a big step to me. I did have to navigate

the many details, start from scratch, make new friends, study in a new educational system, and most significant of all, not see my family for the next five years or longer. Despite all this, I felt prepared. I had the skills and disposition to survive and thrive, in this new environment. Or so I thought. By thrive I mean in a variety of aspects, including but not limited to academics. This is not to say that I did not or do not thrive in the US. It was and still is different. Different enough for me to feel and experience, but difficult to put into words. A sense of confusion that cannot be articulated in clear-cut terms. As I look back, reflect, analyze, and engage with related scholarship, my complicated sense of confusion comes to makes more sense.

It is through living, telling, retelling, and reliving that I try to make sense of the puzzle of my own lived experiences in this new setting (Clandinin, 2013). These experiences have come to be a puzzle that cannot necessarily be explained in terms of what happened and how they happened. They mainly occur through looks, glances, hesitations, minor differences in treatment, and microaggressions. The puzzle resurfaces when people hesitate to communicate with me during a networking event; in exercise classes when none of the other attendees wants to be my partner; and in stores and restaurants when questioning gazes follow me, optimistically merely out of curiosity. This sense that became my constant companion during my interactions in the US peaked my curiosity as to what was happening? What made this different from my previous experiences? Is it an isolated, personal matter or is it beyond the individual and rather a social phenomenon? To clarify, it does not need to be an either/or case.

A Story of a Flickering Hope

This cyclical movement from the personal, to social, to political, to historical, and back to personal narratives—triggered a sense of curiosity that I engage with in this research. I engage with this puzzle via constant personal reflection, continuous formal and informal discussions with

my fellow research companions, and a critical review of relevant scholarship. All of these accounts are then referred to and analyzed based on the time and context of their occurrence, the history behind them, and the politics that inform them.

As Hammack (2011) explains, narratives cannot be viewed in isolation or as idiosyncratic phenomena. To him, every story is political in nature, informed by societal discourse, and has the potential to reconfigure established social categories. Based on Hammack's (2011) assertion, there must be more to my story. While Clandinin's (2013) position regarding the embeddedness of stories has less of a political undertone, she agrees that stories are born in and through their larger environment. To her, the stories we live have either been acquired by us as individuals, consciously or subconsciously, or have been given or ascribed to us by the outside environment. In either case, I have become involved in a relationship, a relationship between myself and the setting I have chosen to live in temporarily.

I bring my personal background into this relationship of being Iranian and a hijabi Muslim woman. I also bring the history of Iran-US relations into the picture; in fact, *conflict* might be a more suitable term in this case. The September 11th attacks and the global events concerning the rise and fall of ISIS are certainly considerations here. At the end of the day, I live within a conservative, Christian, rural, and Midwestern context. Recounting these stories not only assists me in forming a mutual relationship with the outside environment, but also influences the shaping of my social identity (Frank, 2010). Furthermore, the telling of these stories plays a multifaceted role. On the individual level, storytelling is a means to reflect on and analyze personal experiences. Stories also provide a platform for personal narratives to interact with one another and evolve. As these stories evolve and transform, my hope is that they move on to affect their larger environment

(Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, Frank, 2010; Huber, Caine, Huber, & Steeves, 2013; Polkinghorne, 1995).

The following dissertation is a narration of my journey through a research which is intimately personal and intensely theoretical for me. Intimately personal because, as you will learn, I have a passionate personal investment in it. This study became a platform for me to speak of a constant black cloud accompanying me that I could not necessarily articulate. It also allowed for me a growth that I did not anticipate happening in the process. The journey provided me with a worldview entirely different from the one I started with. It was also a journey through my own biases, which I continue to navigate my way out of. It was also intensely theoretical as I was constantly challenged to think, see, and feel beyond the colonized boundaries of academia and established western norms, and discourse. I hope I have not taken this so far that I lose my academic credibility and meaningful comprehensibility for my audience. So, despite the potential discomfort, I ask you, reader, to accept this blurring of boundaries as a challenge and step on this journey with me. I take great pride in the process and what I ask of you is to walk on this journey with me. I will not promise neither full closure nor a perfect ending. However, what I hope to accomplish is the opening of new possibilities (Clandinin, 2013; Thomas, 2012). I hope to pose questions that encourage you to probe deeply, think critically, empathize compassionately, and see differently. To do so, I will begin by explaining my paradigmatic shift. This is not the paradigmatic shift commonly known in academia, although that is an aspect of my theoretical grounding. This is, rather, a shift in my attitude that occurred during the research process that dared me to think differently about the entire journey.

One of the liberating aspects of this research has been that I choose to identify and write as a believer, monotheist Muslim to be specific, in my research process. As Grande (2008) puts it,

oftentimes academia leaves little space for the acknowledgement of ‘other’ identities and ways of knowing. Hence, colonized identities are pushed to think, work, and write a certain way to be validated by the system. In this dissertation, I create a hybrid space that allows for the presence of me, as the person I am, in the research process. In this, I follow Taliaferro-Baszile’s (2011) model of writing through me and accept my role as the researcher. Moving forward, I hope to gather the strength and courage to be vulnerably me (see Brown, 2015); not the distant, disengaged, all-knowing, invincible researcher image that academia would like to see of me. The second transformative aspect of this research has been the emotions I attach to my work. Initially, I oscillated between emotions of anger, fury, frustration, and powerlessness as I encountered injustices in discourse, attitude, and behavior. While these injustices remain unfair, I choose to approach them from a place of hope and view them as an opportunity for growth. This is definitely not easy at times, but I have chosen to place value on the transformation of the world within as much as I value social transformation. I will explore this in more detail in the discussion section.

I am reminded of the Persian saying, “*عدو شود سبب خیر اگر خدا خواهد*”, which translates as “*the enemy can become a source of blessing if God wills.*” The underlying notion is that despite the negative appearance of matters, you can find great positivity if you look closely. You can find a silver lining, as the English saying goes. I chose to begin my dissertation from the end because, before anything else, I am grateful for the immensely positive impact it has had on me. This positive influence, like any other social/emotional phenomenon, is complex, multilayered, and multidimensional. I will try to unpack it as I narrate the story of my research.

I would like to begin with an introduction of myself, as I believe it comes into play almost all throughout my dissertation. Beyond my personal role as a researcher—my identity, beliefs, and commitments—I believe my background has a more important significance. As the cover page of

this dissertation suggests, I am Nastaran Karimi and I am completing this dissertation to fulfill the requirements of a doctoral degree in Curriculum Studies. I am a Muslim woman who adheres to the hijab. The notion of hijab is a relatively complex matter which I will delve deeper into in future discussions. However, to provide you with a reference point, it means I cover my hair with a head scarf. As previously mentioned, I am also identified by all official constituencies as Iranian. I use the term identified by, placing the responsibility of identification on national and international organizations, as for me, like many others, the construct of national identity is far more complex than a rigid, single word (Moya, 2006). It is difficult for me to identify with one single place, as I have only lived half of my life in Iran. The other half I have lived in Australia, England, Dubai, and the US. Although Iran holds a very special place in my heart, all these other places are dear to me in their own right. Despite my personal confusion, it seems that all national, social, political, and economic institutions unanimously agree on my Iranian identity. In this context, my ascriptive identity is stronger and more prevalent than my subjective identity. For the purposes of this dissertation, and due to the important role it plays in articulating this research, I am Iranian.

Going back to the Persian saying, at the surface level, as a human being, specifically a Muslim woman who has directly and indirectly been affected by Islamophobia, there is not much I can say to defend Islamophobic rhetoric. However, I believe at some level Islamophobia has been a blessing to me in the US context. I came to this realization as I was writing researcher notes after a meaningful focus group discussion with my co-researchers. In my researcher's journal I wrote the following:

As I was sitting around a table with women from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Pakistan, more than anything I appreciated the sense of solidarity and sisterhood I felt with these women. Some had been long-time friends of mine, while others I met because of this research;

nevertheless, throughout our deep conversation and the periodic jokes we made about the Middle-East, I felt a sense of connection that could only be attributed to our context. Had we met in any of our respective countries, we would have passed one another without a second glance (if not with a skeptical gaze). However, after moving to England, and particularly since coming to the US, each of these women—regardless of her culture, background, language, or national origin—were my sisters. And this sense has continuously been validated through salaams, a form of Islamic greeting, with total strangers. It was also emphasized during the research process in the support I received from fellow hijabi women and the honest vulnerability my co-researchers showed in our formal interviews and informal discussions. This sense of sisterhood has been such an integral part of my survival as a graduate and international student. So much so that I even anticipated changing the title of this research to ‘The Blessing of Islamophobia’. As alluring as the idea is for me, I will table it for future publications. (Researcher’s Notes, October 2017)

The Middle-East Story

A Story of Old but Fresh Religious Divergence

To an outsider, this reflection of mine may seem rather strange, if not entirely meaningless. A group of hijabi Muslim women sitting together at a table might be an entirely natural matter to the average European or American passerby. However, inquiring deeper than the surface, it is not as simple and natural as it seems. In fact, it is far more complicated. As you will soon learn, my background as an Iranian is of particular importance in this context. The complex relationship between different countries in the Middle-East has historical, religious, political, and economic

roots. The first conflict is rooted in a long-standing historical and religious disagreement between the Muslim community. The Muslim community is divided into two main religious groups, the Shias and Sunnis. The rift between the two groups occurred right after the death of Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, in 632 A.D. The initial disagreement was on the spiritual/political leader of the Muslim community after the prophet. One group, currently known as Shias, believe that Allah appointed a leader who was announced by the prophet before his death. This group believes that in addition to a political leader, Allah appointed a spiritual leader who was most knowledgeable about matters related to Islam, metaphysics, life, and the hereafter. The second group, known as Sunnis, did not agree with this appointment and instead chose to follow the caliphates after the prophet. This initial divergence began with a historical dispute and later impacted other aspects of the two groups' belief systems. While some believe these differences are deep and irreconcilable, others believe they are insignificant. Despite this historical dispute and differences in belief, both groups agree on the general doctrines of Islam such as belief in one God, the prophet hood of Mohammad, Quran as Islam's holy book, and the hereafter that follows life. As previously mentioned, while some do not view these differences as a legitimate source of dispute, others have taken them to be a reason for antagonism toward the other group (Hosain, 1933; Makris, 2007).

A Story of Never-Ending Sociopolitical Dispute

This historical religious dispute has over the years become intertwined with the politics of the region, which in turn has fueled further controversy. For example, Iran as a predominantly Shia state, uses religious justification for the political power play it engages in. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia as the hub for Sunni doctrine adopts a similar strategy. This interplay between belief and politics has become the underlying justification of antagonism, alliance, war, and a variety of power struggles. The two, politics and sectarian beliefs are so entangled that it is close to

impossible to distinguish the motivation behind much of the action that occurs in the region (see Wehrey, 2014). Moreover, the role of economics, the oil trade in particular, is another defining factor in the sides that are taken or abandoned. In addition to regional politics, the coalition that is formed between countries in the region and western countries, most important of all the US, determines how countries engage with one another. Talking about Iran in particular, many countries in the world and the region have mutually hostile relations with Iran as these relations are overshadowed by the animosity between Iran and the US since the 1979 Iranian Revolution (Kumar, 2012). In addition to Iran's important role in the geopolitical landscape of the region, I continually use Iran as an example because as an Iranian, I have had to continuously navigate life under the burden of such hostile relations, much of which is inconceivable to the average global citizen. Some of my own experiences and those of my co-researchers will unfold as I re/tell the story of my research.

To further complicate matters, despite the common stereotypes:

- Not all Muslims are Arabs.
- Not all Arabs are Muslim.
- Not all Middle-Easterners are Arabs.
- Not all Middle-Easterners or Muslims speak Arabic.

The reason I emphasize these points is three-fold, first to dismantle such stereotypes. Second, to explain the rich ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity of the region. This is a context in which a juxtaposition of Turks, Kurds, Arabs, and Pashtuns live together under the flags of different nation states. Third, to add another level of complexity to the politics of the region. While many of these ethnic groups live side by side in peace under different nation states, there are also those who have fought or are fighting for an ethnic alliance, separation from their current

governing regimes, and the formation of an independent governing state. The Kurdish minorities living in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey is one example. When speaking of the Middle-East and the Muslim community, not only we are talking about a rich diversity. We also reference the historical, religious, social, ethnic, and economic alliances and antagonisms intermingled with politics. There is nothing simple, homogenous, or static about it, despite the prevailing efforts of old and new orientalist discourse (Kumar, 2012).

A Story of Transformation

This stereotypical lumping of Muslims into one homogenous group, however, has encouraged me and my co-researchers to form an informal kinship despite the differences (and even disputes) of our national contexts. This is not to say that we are entirely free from misinformation, misconceptions, and propaganda. However, moving to the US and encountering a different form of prejudice has been a blessing in disguise and allowed us to relearn many of the misconceptions we held toward one another. Through this research or elsewhere we have had to engage in conversations, not necessarily comfortable at first, to learn about the biases we grew up with. In our stories, we traveled back and forth in time and place to transcend the metanarratives we were continuously exposed to in our respective contexts (Huber, Caine, Huber, & Steeves, 2013). By retelling these individual and shared stories, I also hope to provide an opportunity for those living in the US context to reconsider the common grand narratives that inform their conceptions of the Muslim community. This dissertation is a mini-narrative that aims to engage with its audience: first, to create a mutual teaching and learning opportunity; and second, to disrupt the grand narratives we are all entrenched in (Bowman, 2006; Hammack, 2011; Huber, Caine, Huber, & Steeves, 2013). I invite my audience to read this manuscript with an experiential and an imaginative eye. What I mean by this is to see, hear, feel, and reflect on the nuances of our lived

experiences within this context. I would like you to walk in our shoes and see the world through our eyes (Phillion, He, & Connelly, 2005). My hope is that the narration and re-narration of our stories allows for more enriched and meaningful narratives to form. My purpose is to hold space for the transformation of the lived experiences of Muslim women on micro- and macro-levels (Clandinin, 2013; Frank, 2010).

The US Story

A Story of an Old Love-Hate Relationship

In order to achieve this purpose, we need to gain an understanding of such metanarratives and how they are formed. When we hear or think about the words ‘Islam’ and ‘Muslims’ in the US context, what are these terms commonly associated with? Why? Where do these associations come from? There is a common stereotypical perception that tends to equate Muslims, Arabs, and Middle-Easterners as synonymous. More importantly, there is a confusion surrounding the categories of Arabs, Muslims, and terrorists; as a result, the initial reaction of most Americans toward Muslims is fear (Ewing, 2008). In order to understand this sentiment and what is currently known as Islamophobia, we need examine the social, political, and historical events that gave birth to it. Similar to any social phenomenon, Islamophobia cannot be detached from its larger setting. In an attempt to make sense of Islamophobia, its meaning, causes, implications, and potential remedies, we need to situate it on the place versus time plane. What is meant by this is that Islamophobia needs be viewed in the context of time, both in terms of the current global events that are shaping it and the historical occurrences that led to the formation of the concept. Moreover, to formulate a comprehensive analysis of Islamophobia, examining its past, present, local, and

global geopolitics is an essential requirement, as well as the sociopolitical rhetoric that inform the public consciousness.

From a historical perspective, Islamophobia can be traced back to the very early stages of Islam as a social and ideological concept. The spread of Islam to Europe (e.g. Spain, France, and the Balkans), created the initial rivalry between a predominantly Christian Europe and Islam. Followed by decades of wars, including but not limited to the Crusades, this enmity grew over time. European armies brought home with them tales and myths about Islam, Muslims, and the Middle-East way of life. Through these fantastical tales, Muslims became the exotic ‘other’ who were, due to their barbaric practices, the enemy of Europe and Christianity. Later, Islamophobic texts and discourse was propagated in Europe based on its colonial agenda to rule over other countries (e.g. West Africa). To them, Islam had the potential to become an opposing force to European colonial imperialism. It was this mentality that pitted Christian Europe against the Muslim orient. In this iteration of Islamophobia, Islam and Muslims were enemies of Europe and Christianity, which threatened not only basic Western values but also security. In this capacity, Islamophobia becomes a matter of survival in which it is either ‘us’ or ‘them’ (Lopez, 2011; Rana, 2007). As Said (1979) also explained, this construction of Muslims as the ‘other’ in European consciousness became the foundation of the orientalist tradition.

During the eighteenth century and the colonial expansion of some European countries into Muslim lands, the study of Islam, Muslims, and the orient became an academic tradition. As the power relations between Europe and their colonized countries grew, scholarship on the orient increased. The main objective of this intellectual work—with its own political, economic, and military intentions—was to establish control over the orient. Ironically, the colonization process had very little intention to eradicate Islam as an ideology; Islam was understood as a declining

concept. As previously mentioned, Europe's main purpose was to exert control over its colonized land by establishing secularized national democracies. This was due to the long-standing belief that Islam was a backward belief system, the antithesis of any form of civility, and in need of saving by any means. This very belief, perpetuated by orientalist discourse and scholarship, became the justifying reason for the domination and subjugation of Muslims and Muslim countries. Since then, the notion of Islamophobia has been closely interconnected with the complicated relationship between the west and Islam, a history of imperial subjugation and oppression (Rana, 2007). Hence, the current manifestation of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiments is the resurgence of a historical phenomenon that began before the Crusades and continues to the present day. While Islamophobia can be viewed as a recurring historical construct, this does not mean that it has not changed and evolved in shape and form over time (Allen, 2010).

A Story of a Newer Love-Hate Relationship

The relation between Islam and the west has taken twists and turns over time and has grown to be one of the most confusing and complicated relationships of the modern world, both in terms of the connection between Muslim and non-Muslim countries, and the interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims in western countries. These relations have historically been and continue to be overshadowed by "alarmism and simplification," as Halliday (1999) referenced (p. 892). Halliday (1999) explained *alarmism* is a sense of threat that both sides feel. For Muslims, the most prominent fear is the threat of terrorism. In Muslim countries, there is the constant worry of western conspiracy and imperialistic tendencies. These perceptions are based on the second aspect of their relationship, *simplification*. At the very heart of simplification lies the notion of understanding the other as a unitary block. This is based on the assumption that all Muslims are the same or assuming a universal identity for the west. These simplistic and suspicious

interpretations are often fed by the media and certain scholarship (e.g. that of Naipaul and Huntington). As previously explained, such perceptions are mere constructions in the public consciousness, mainly by the media. In fact, there is nothing simple or homogenous about the Muslim community and predominantly Muslim countries.

On the international level, with the symbolic division of land into nation states, nations were divided into core and periphery. In the hierarchy of this world order, Arab/Muslim territories became the 'other' to Europe and later the US. This resulted in xenophobia, a form of prejudice mainly fed by ethnocentric tendencies. The systematic division of 'us' versus 'them' has two main ramifications: fear and hatred of the other, and the belief in the supremacy of one's own ethnic group over the other. While not all Muslim are Arabs or vice versa, this common misconception assumes an equal identity for both (Ewing, 2008). The ideological construction of anti-Arabism, anti-Islamism, and Islamophobia functions on two levels. First, it promotes an essentialist and universal categorization of members of this group, ignores the individual identities of its members, and merely views them as members of the group. Second, it ascribes the following negative attributes to the group: in this case, barbaric, backward, and inferior (Taras, 2013). Such sentiments, developed at a global level, subsequently trickle down to local settings as well.

As no social phenomenon occurs in a vacuum, the increase of Islamophobic tendencies on a local level is closely related to the sociohistorical events of its time, particularly immigration patterns. Much of the enmity toward Muslims is due to the expansion of Muslim communities in western countries. After World War II, the US and many European countries experienced a large influx of immigrants from Pakistan, India, and other commonwealth countries. Nonetheless, until the 1980s Muslims were largely invisible from social and political discourse, mainly because these immigrants identified with their ethnic backgrounds rather than their religious affiliations. Over

time, however, second and third generation immigrants, loosing ties with their ethnic origin, increasingly identified as Muslims and replaced their ethnic identity with their religious affiliation (Allen, 2010; Sirin & Fine, 2008). This growth of a culture considered as ‘alien’ inflicted a sense of fear and insecurity in the western world, which has historically consisted of an absolute divide between anything Muslim and European (Taras, 2013). This legacy of an essential opposition between Islam/Muslims/orient and Christianity/western world was later transferred to the US by European settlers. The US inherited an orientalist mentality that was further developed via travel books, missionary reports, and political writings (Zahedi, 2011).

In the formative years of the US, Islam played an important role in the identity formation of a Christian nation. The widespread trope of the infidel Muslim disrupted the hierarchical position of Christianity. As the US emerged and grew as a nation, Islam was considered as the menacing other, standing in the way of the divine order of white Christian supremacy and American exceptionalism. Both in Europe and the newfound world, the notion of racism and the superiority of a certain group over others was closely tied to cultural and religious practices. Hence, Muslims and Jews were considered as the inferior ‘other’ in need of saving via religious conversion. During the conquest of the new world, native Americans and their practices were viewed in the same light. Ironically, as Christian Europeans were attempting to understand Native Americans, through a stereotypical perception, they were viewed as Muslims. The underlying ideology was that both native Americans and Muslims were the barbaric and depraved ‘other’ with strange practices. In Christian eyes, despite vast difference between Native American and Muslim practices, both were deemed immoral. The underlying notion of this essentialized othering was to justify the imperial project. The construction of a religious ‘other’ also played a significant role in

the subjugation of African slaves. Slaves were mainly identified based on physical attributes, and this identification was paired with ethnic identities, cultural practices, and religion (Rana, 2007).

A Story of the Latest Love-Hate Relationship

Although most of us may not be aware of the complex historical, sociocultural, and geopolitical events that occurred between our countries and the rest of the world, these are the stories that nevertheless inform our collective consciousness. Frank (2010) explained that these stories are formulated subconsciously and act as filters through which people interact with unfamiliar stories. “This *master narrative* represents a collective storyline which group members perceive as compulsory—a story which is so central to the group’s existence and “essence” that it commands identification and integration into the personal narrative” (Hammack, 2011, p. 313). According to Hammack (2011), these narratives and stories become an integral component of our very existence. Although it is uncomfortable to accept, we can all attest to various examples of master narratives regarding gender, class, race, nationality, ethnicity, and religion conceptualized within different societies. These individual narratives are discursively informed and constructed by such master narratives. Despite the familiarity and comfort of master narratives, they are not rigid and static through time and place. Novel stories have the capacity to “*ambush one’s inner library*” and create a space for new narratives to be formed, even though this narrative is ingrained deeper than we would like to acknowledge (Hammack, 2011).

When talking about orientalist and colonial master narratives about the Middle-East in particular, I do not refer to a historical phenomenon and a story of the past with its worst days behind us. On the contrary, it is a prevalent contemporary matter with significant consequences. Despite this long-standing history intertwined with global politics, September 11th is a turning point in the discourse surrounding Islamophobia for several reasons. September 11th brought the

topic of Islam and Muslims to the forefront of political debate and media coverage; moreover, long-standing emotions regarding Muslims surfaced in the general public (Rana, 2007). It was at this point that the term and concept of Islamophobia, despite its long-standing history, was officially introduced to the US public consciousness.

Until the 20th century, the othering of Muslims was mainly rooted in national, cultural, and racial differences embedded in orientalist discourse. The attack on the twin towers, in particular, gave this form of prejudice and discrimination a religious spin (Afshar, 2008). Moreover, theories such as Huntington's proposition of an imminent clash between Islamic and western civilization fueled the legitimacy of Islamophobia. Being exposed to such ideologies, the 9/11 attacks became a defining moment that validated theories of an eternal divide and unavoidable clash between predominantly Muslim countries and western states (Ahmed, 2007). Rather than initiating Islamophobia, the attacks rechanneled existing antagonistic attitudes and served as a catalyst to justify such views (Afshar, 2008). Afshar (2008) argued that since then Islam has come to the forefront of global attention, effectively replacing the orient in political discourse and media representation. Islam was represented as a belief system with backward and barbaric practices and essentialized as the 'other' sharing no common values with the rest of the world, more specifically the west. In this capacity, Islamophobia is founded on the general assumption that Islam, now representing the orient, is a monolithic religion. It is backward and barbaric in practice and consequently inferior to western values. Lastly, it is a militant political ideology that supports terrorism and violence (Ahmed, 2007). This conception of Islam is intricately linked to the notion of a homogenous, backward orient. While the construct of the orient itself is problematic, it is worth noting that the term refers to Middle-Eastern countries (Said, 1979).

Nowadays, media is often the sole source of knowledge about Muslims. Accordingly, it is only natural that Americans continue to confuse Muslims (a religious group) with Arabs (an ethnic identity). The Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU) explained that this stems from the media's fusion of the two identity markers, often alongside the de facto criminalization of both (Cainkar, 2002). For example, according to a poll conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2017, of eight major religious groups mentioned in the survey, Americans had the most negative attitude toward Muslims (the other religious groups were Jews, Catholics, mainline Protestants, evangelical Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, and Mormons). ISPU concluded that the media contributes to the formation of this negative attitude toward Muslims. Discriminatory policies are also evident within the US government. One example is the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), which has impacted the lives of more than 60,000 Muslims in the US via interrogations, raids, arrests, detentions, and so on (Cainkar, 2002). The latest example is the on and off US travel ban on eight countries (Iran, Chad, Yemen, North Korea, Somalia, Syria, Libya, and Venezuela), six of which are predominantly Muslim. This ban is one of the many anti-Muslim policies and rhetoric propagated by President Donald Trump. Additionally, Islamophobia cannot be understood in isolation from the politics and foreign policies that govern the world (Safi, 2007).

In the modern era, ever since World War II, the United States and Muslim states have had a love-hate relationship. In addition to the historical east/west divide and their long-standing rivalry, current global political debates also fuel this antagonism. Differing positions on the matter of Israel, the US occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan, Russian involvement in Afghanistan, Iran's Islamic revolution, references to an axis of evil, and the war on terror play a significant role in positioning the east (i.e. the Middle-East) in opposition to the west (i.e. Europe and the US) (Allen, 2010; Safi, 2007; Semati, 2010). To some, the US is the defender of global human rights and

democracy, while the contestants of this argument believe that that the US has continued the imperialist and colonization practices of its early history (Ibrahim, 2007).

The Purpose and Direction Story

A Story of Meaning and Purpose

As a result of this systematic othering on both global and national levels, Muslims face multilayered forms of marginalization, not only informed by their religion but also their national, ethnic, cultural, and racial backgrounds. Positioned at the intersection of different layers of their identity, Muslims are perceived and stereotyped in an increasingly negative light (Cesari, 2004; Ewing, 2008). In the process of being constructed as a homogenous block based on their general background and appearance, they are also placed in a lower caste from their western counterparts. This phenomenon, known as racialization, occurs in the interaction between groups of different power dynamics. It is a relationship formed between the powerful and the less powerful through which certain essentialist attributes are ascribed to members of a group. This binding element could be based on race, ethnicity, nationality, immigrant status, or religion. It is a form of gaze, a prejudgment of certain groups of people. This also relates to Said's (1979) orientalism. According to Said (1979), orientalism is a gaze, lens, or outlook through which the west views and understands the east. In support of Said's (1979) argument, Garner and Selod (2014) argued that one of the strongest identifiers of racialization is national origin. One of the ways that Muslims are racialized in western countries is their discursive exclusion from belonging to the country where they live (e.g., the US). Oftentimes, Muslim-ness and American-ness are positioned against one another, forcing Muslims to choose one or the other (Garner & Selod, 2014).

This systematic conception of mistrust and divide impacts Muslims as well. Reports show that Muslims hold a negative view of western countries. While there is real reason behind much of this antagonism, including terrorist attacks by ISIS or the US invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, this has first and foremost become a war of ideologies. Over time this relationship has become a cycle of actions and reactions that have reinforced mutual hostility (Nimer, 2007). In this capacity, “Anti-Americanism and Islamophobia share a common denominator: both are used as strategic weapons in the war of ideas, particularly among people who stand on radical sides of the political/ideological spectrum, both in Muslim societies and in the United States” (Safi, 2007, p. 21). In order to imagine a different trajectory for the future, one that is not based antagonism, exclusion, animosity, and war, it is imperative for us to understand the historical sociopolitical metanarratives that continue to inform our worldview and relation with the ‘other.’ Critically analyzing our worldviews also requires a committed engagement and mindful interaction among people to gain alternative stories from the dominant metanarrative (Huber, Caine, Huber, & Steeves, 2013). Hence, to reimagine a relation based on mutual respect and understanding, it is imperative for us to engage with “*little stories*” (Bowman, 2006); stories that provide an alternate way of seeing from that of the predominant discourse. Little stories create a bridge for communication rather than a wall of separation.

A Story of Later Stories

In Chapter One, I briefly and broadly discuss my personal experiences in the US, the history of Islam, the sociopolitics of the Middle-East, the history of colonization, and global affairs in order to lay a foundation for my research. This foundation serves three purposes: first, it provides a contextual understanding of the time, history, place, and politics that this research takes place in and is informed by; second, it provides background knowledge on how and why this research came

to be; third, it provides the depth and breadth required to understand a complex social phenomenon such as Islamophobia and how it relates to the lives of Muslim women. In the following chapters, particularly as I analyze my data, I delve deeper into some of these matters and explain them in more detail.

Through this research, I hope to understand and narrate the experiences of international hijabi Muslim women studying at a Midwestern university. I narrate these stories in conversation with widespread Islamophobic rhetoric and global geopolitical discourse. In Chapter Two, I discuss the history, conceptualization, and definition of Islamophobia. I consider Islamophobia in relation to concepts such as nationality, racism, and gender. In the last section, I discuss the implications of Islamophobia on the lived experiences of Muslim women. I particularly focus on hijabi Muslim students who study at US universities.

In Chapter Three, I explain this study's theoretical framework and the language it provided me to talk about this puzzlement in theoretical terms within the larger field of postcolonial studies. To understand what I mean by postcolonial work, I provide an overview of how I conceptualize colonialism and postcolonialism. I then describe my understanding and use of post-colonial theory as the lens I adopt for this research. Since this study focuses on the experiences of international hijabi Muslim women, I particularly relate my conceptualization of postcolonial theory to notions of nationality (in this case, predominantly Muslim countries) and religion (in this case, Islam) and what it means to be a Muslim woman with an outward signifier from the Middle-East.

In Chapter Four, I explain my choice of narrative inquiry as the adopted methodology of this research. I particularly focus on narrative inquiry's postcolonial stance, constructionist approach, and holistic, contextual nature. I also provide a detailed account of my processes of composing the narratives of my fellow research companions. These accounts include how I found

these companions; where, when, and how we talked about the topics of this study; and my role as the researcher.

In Chapters Five and Six, I narrate the experiences of Najma and Heba as they lived and studied in the US. Najma and Heba are two composite characters that represent the five women I worked with in this study. In chapter Four, under the “Introducing Hijabi Heba and Niqabi Najma” section, I explain in detail how these five women became Heba and Najma. I also add my own account to these narratives in the form of personal reflection and conversation with the text. As previously mentioned, these stories are situated within their larger sociopolitical discourse and the context they take place in.

Chapters Seven and Eight are a summary and discussion of Najma and Heba’s narratives. These sections adopt a critical lens to understand these narratives in relation to their larger environment. They also provide a framework for rethinking and reimagining how we interact with not only Muslim women, but also the sociopolitical discourse of Islamophobia. These discussions can be used to raise awareness about this minority group, particularly in Teacher Education Programs and Multicultural Education classes.

CHAPTER 2. ISLAMOPHOBIA

Introduction

In this chapter I establish an understanding of the term Islamophobia. I create a conceptualization of the term grounded in theories that have been developed over decades. This conceptualization serves as a point of reference for the lived experiences of Heba, Najma, and I, co-researchers in this study. This chapter provides the basis of further theorization and the expansion of our current understanding of the term and its implications. The conceptualization is grounded in academic scholarship and expanded upon via personal experiences. Heba and Najma's voices add depth and breadth to how I conceptualize Islamophobia. I also use the term 'understanding' rather than 'defining' Islamophobia, as I believe a rigid definition of the term limits our understanding of its complexity and multidimensionality. To gain a more holistic understanding, I also create conversations around Islamophobia as it pertains to the notions of nationality, racism, gender, and hijab.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Islamophobia, like any other social phenomenon, does not occur in a vacuum. An in-depth understanding of the matter is necessary in order to analyze its relation to historical and current geopolitics as well as sociocultural discourse. Based on the focus of this research, I specifically discuss how Islamophobia relates to the aforementioned concepts. I create a dialogue on the interconnectivity of these matters and their real-life effects by weaving the personal stories of my co-researchers into the relevant academic literature. I incorporate excerpts of our experiences to humanize the scholarly concepts referenced here. I particularly focus on these concepts as they relate to a more comprehensive understanding the

experiences of international hijabi Muslim women studying in US universities. In this chapter, my focus is the concept of Islamophobia. In subsequent chapters I narrate the experiences of Heba and Najma and examine in detail how Islamophobia affects the lived experiences of Muslim women.

Islamophobia

In response to academia's obsession with precise definitions and the books dedicated to their exactitude, I will provide a general definition of Islamophobia here. However, I will begin at the end. From personal observations that are deeply meaningful to me and have shaped this research to become what it now is. Before entering the US, I was oblivious to the prevalence of a matter that I have now come to call Islamophobia. Nevertheless, I have continuously encountered instances in which I learned how little people around me knew about Islam, Muslims, or how misinformed they were. One scenario that I have repeatedly tried to decipher over the years is as follows:

I became an executive member of an NGO that aimed to empower women through feminism, leadership, and spirituality. We held monthly workshops with a group of women that had registered to be part of our year-long program. We were halfway through the program and we had gotten to know one another pretty well. One day I was descending a staircase, slipped, and fell on my wrist. I was holding it in pain, and one of the participating members came up to see how I was doing. She was an extremely nice and caring lady who reminded me a lot of my mother. She offered to take me to the doctor and said it might be broken. I assured her that it was not broken, as I had broken my wrist twice before. To keep the conversation going, she asked how the previous cases had happened. I explained that both times had happened while I was playing volleyball. With great exclamation, wide eyes, and

a sound close to a gasp, she asked, 'You play volleyball?' I have to admit, I still did not understand what the exclamation was for. As we continued the conversation, it became clearer and clearer. Her next question was, 'Who do you play volleyball with... your brothers?' My brothers? I thought to myself. I only have one, and we were barely enough to make up a volleyball team. Had she assumed that I had the necessary eleven brothers? The underlying assumption of eleven siblings was partly fascinating and partly frightening for me. Eleven brothers? Even in creating an imaginary volleyball team, she could not fathom the idea that I could potentially have sisters who played volleyball. The thought of a Muslim woman playing volleyball seemed so farfetched that despite learning that I played volleyball, I was still the anomaly to a rule, an unwritten rule that Muslim women did not play volleyball. I can dig even deeper into the assumptions that made up this singular example. Such as not only assuming that I had so many brothers, but also that they had all traveled half way around the world so that I would not study alone. (Researcher's Notes, April 2017)

As I reflect on this incident and many others, I do not identify any malicious intentions; in fact, I see many nice people who have tried to show their care and support in their own way. However, the widespread misinformation and lack of knowledge is overwhelming to me. Accordingly, I would like to establish a common ground regarding not only Islamophobia, but also various forms of xenophobia, prejudice, hatred, othering, and stereotyping that is targeted toward a certain group. These phenomena share one underlying reason: a lack of knowledge. Where this lack of knowledge stems from and where biased information comes from are extremely complicated matters. In regard to Islamophobia, I will delve deeper into the roots of metanarratives that provide biased information and a *singular story*. Furthermore, in recounting this incident, I

have two intentions. First, as previously mentioned, I intend this study to become a bridge that provides understanding and connects people. I intend to avoid the demonization of individuals who perpetuate Islamophobic attitudes or behaviors. Although some do hold deep hatred and prejudice toward Muslims, many people are, in fact, nice people with good intentions but limited knowledge. Therefore, the underlying premise for the narratives recounted in this study is that we are all humans who make mistakes; that being said, we should seize any opportunity to learn. Second, I intend to extend the definition of Islamophobia to include words and actions that are not mean hearted in nature, however, have the potential to hurt deeply. I will explain this matter further in my discussion of the origins and definition of the term Islamophobia.

September 11th, 2001 was a turning point in the discourse surrounding Islamophobia for several reasons. The tragedy not only brought the topics of Islam and Muslims to the forefront of political debate and media coverage; in the aftermath, long-standing emotions of animosity toward Muslims surfaced among the general public as well (Rana, 2007). At this point, that the term and concept of Islamophobia, despite its standing history, was officially introduced to the public consciousness in the US. Islamophobia was first coined in late 20th century Britain. The official popularization of the term occurred with the 1997 Runnymede Trust Report, “Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All.” Although the phenomenon was not necessarily new, the report was an attempt to understand the position of Islam and Muslims among the British population and its political discourse. Since then, the term has been commonly adopted by NGOs, politicians, and the media. According to Bleich (2011), the contemporary concept of Islamophobia originally emerged in the 1990s and early 2000s. The term was then adopted by activists, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and international organizations in western countries to refer to damaging actions and discourse targeting Islam and Muslims. September 11th, however, was the central

reason for the rise of Islamophobic tendencies and the widespread use of the term (Allen, 2010; Bleich, 2012).

As for the origin of the term, there are competing claims. According to the Oxford Dictionary, the term was first used in the American periodical *Insight* in the early 1990s. Others trace the word back to Dinet and Ibrahim's "Acces de Delire Islamophobe" published in 1925. Dinet and Ibrahim used the term to criticize scholars whose fear of Islam affected their scholarly work (e.g., Casanova and Lammens). Criticizing such scholarship, they posited that Islamophobia was a motivating force behind the degradation of Islam. Scholars' hostile attitudes toward the religion, and their conscious efforts to discard it altogether, were representations of Islamophobic attitudes (Allen, 2010; Lopez, 2011). Another early use of the term was during the Iranian Revolution. In this case, the term was used to refer to Muslims' fear of Islam, which is completely distinct from its modern-day conceptualization. This definition was mainly used by 'mullahs' to refer to Muslim-born liberals who did not necessarily adhere to their set Islamic standards (e.g. women who refused to wear the hijab). In both cases, the term denotes a meaning different from its current use (Allen, 2010).

As previously mentioned, in its contemporary sense, the term was officially used in the 1997 British Runnymede Trust Report. This report was submitted to the British government as a means to raise awareness about the status of Muslims in Britain. The report identified eight tenets regarding the public's attitude toward Islam and Muslims: 1) Islam as a monolithic and rigid concept; 2) Islam and Muslims as the alien 'other' lacking common values with other cultures; 3) Islam and Muslims as backward and inferior to the west; 4) Islam and Muslims as violent and aggressive; 5) Islam as an ideology that promotes militancy, 6) Islam and Muslims as intolerant toward criticism; 7) Muslims as deserving of discrimination; and 8) anti-Muslim sentiments as

normal (Taras, 2013). As these themes imply, despite advancements in technology, telecommunications, and widespread access to information, Islam and Muslims are generally viewed in a negative light. It is in this climate—based on misinformation, ignorance, misconceptions, misrepresentations, and stereotypes—that Islamophobic tendencies take shape and form (Safi, 2007).

Given the growth of Islamophobic attitudes following 9/11, the matter has become of increasing interest to many researchers and scholars. Despite the history of the concept and its recent frequent use in academic circles, Bleich (2011) argued that there is little consensus among scholars on the actual definition of the term. Some of the most prominent definitions used by researchers are provided by Bleich (2011) as follows:

- Islamophobia is exclusively about fear (or dread), directed at either Islam or Muslims;
- Islamophobia is a rejection of Islam, Muslim groups, and Muslim individuals, on the basis of prejudice and stereotypes with no factual support; and
- Islamophobia is the rejection of either Islam or Muslims that extends beyond thought processes to include concrete actions.

Bleich's (2011) own definition is "indiscriminate negative attitudes or emotions directed at Islam or Muslims," (p. 1582) which includes a wide range of reactions, including "aversion, jealousy, suspicion, disdain, anxiety, rejection, contempt, fear, disgust, anger, and hostility" (Bleich, 2012, p. 182). He also explained that these feelings can be targeted at Islam as a doctrine of belief or Muslims due to their adherence to Islam or their mere membership of the group. According to Bleich (2012), Islamophobia can be categorized alongside concepts such as xenophobia, homophobia, racism, and sexism. Although the surface definition of the term is the attitude of fear, mistrust, or hatred of Islam and its adherents, Zine (2004) countered that this

definition is rather narrow because it dismisses the broader social, structural, and ideological dimensions that form oppression. In my own expansion of the common definitions of Islamophobia adopted in academia, I first include Zine's (2004) point regarding a systematic discourse of hegemonic othering. Second, as previously mentioned, I include words and actions (i.e. microaggressions) that do not appear negative on the surface level but entail an underlying premise that deeply hurt their target. For example, many of us Muslim women are constantly positioned to defend and support the integrity of our fathers, husbands, and brothers. This form of indirect violence often comes through innocent questions such as, "*So does your father approve of you studying?*" or "*Does your husband allow you to do this?*" In addition to the underlying assumption that we (Muslim women) have no rights of our own, and reinforcing the colonial metanarrative of a backward other, these questions also presume violent and untrustworthy male figures in our lives from which we need constant protection. When you happen to have the most supporting father, brother, or husband, it hurts to be asked to compare them to (and defend them against) the predominant monster stereotype of the Middle-Eastern man.

For the purpose of this study, the overarching meaning of Islamophobia is a blanket view of Islam and Muslims, based on stereotypical and prejudicial perceptions perpetuated by colonial discourse. This metanarrative positions 'them' (Islam, Muslims) as the absolute other, enemy, and threat to 'us' (Europe, the US). Such conceptions result in fear, dread, and the subjugation of Islam and Muslims accompanied by words or discrete actions that include discrimination, violence, marginalization, and othering. The definition of Islamophobia could, in fact, include some or all aspects of the above statement. The underlying notion in this overgeneralized definition is that Islam is an essentially evil and backward ideology which contradicts and is inferior to Euro-Americanness (Lopez, 2011). Tied to its historical roots, this binary positioning of Muslims and

the non-Muslim west occurs on local, national, and global levels. This enmity and animosity takes a different shape and form at each level.

Islamophobia and the Notion of Nationality

As I was discussing the notion of Islamophobia with Heba and Najma and how it pertains to their national origins, we started joking about how peaceful or dangerous we each were. What seemed to be common knowledge among us was that despite the construct of the as a unitary block and inferior to Europe and the US, some of us were still preferred to others. We understood an invisible hierarchy: some of us were more dangerous, more backward, more insubordinate, and so on. Jokingly, we tried to recreate this hierarchy and our places within it. For example, if you wanted to exist in the world, Kuwait was not the best option, as most people had no idea what and where Kuwait is. Iran and Saudi Arabia were the worst options due to their exceedingly negative depictions in the US media. Dubai, however, seemed the most alluring option, with its fantastically sunny beaches, tourist destinations, and luxurious accommodations. While we made light of the matter by joking about it, it was a serious matter for all of us. Heba and Najma talked about cases where, based on their circumstances, they chose to identify as an Emarati (a person from the United Arab Emirates, or UAE). Ironically, beyond Dubai, one UAE city, the rest of the country is commonly unknown. So, for clarification purposes, they explained that they were from Dubai. This brought to my mind the many times I had tried to avoid any mention of my national origin. From instead inquiring about the other person to emphasizing that Iran is actually a vestige of the Persian Empire, I had repeatedly attempted to soften and normalize the image of Iran and Iranians. As we navigated these experiences in the US, we were well aware of the politics that informed the public consciousness toward us. From Islamophobic rhetoric to international geopolitics, we are

constantly negotiating for a space at the intersection of our identity markers that feels—at the very least—normal.

From a global perspective, Islamophobia correlates with the anti-immigrant, anti-minority, and anti-terrorist discourse of many western countries (Taras, 2013), in which the notion of nationality and the supremacy of certain states over others is embedded. Thus, Islamophobia as a concept cannot be detached from the construct of nationality. The very foundation of Islamophobia is the idea of a barbaric, backward, and infidel ‘other.’ This constructed ‘other’ is inferior in their belief, values, practices (based on western standards), and in need of saving. This premise became the prevailing mentality of orientalist discourse and the moral justification for colonization and global domination by western countries (Perry, 2014; Rana, 2007; Said, 1979; Taras, 2013). As Alexander (2007) explains, the westerner’s relationship to the Muslim world (i.e. the Middle-East) occurs through the master narrative of western supremacy, a narrative through which the west looks at its Muslim counterpart from a distant space in the heights, disengaged from the reality of their lives and culture. The west understands the Middle-East from a distance which Alexander (2007) calls a *cultural gulf*. In other words, the reason that the west looks down on the orient is its ignorance to the causes and reasons behind Muslims’ suffering. While Alexander’s (2007) explanation has some cogency, what he takes for granted is the privilege and superiority of the west over the Muslim world. In his analysis, the western world is the ideal condition that the Muslim world should aspire to be. In addition to the construct of a backward orient, what feeds this narrative is the absence of factual knowledge about the Middle-East. Furthermore, the mass propagation of a biased media leaves no space for any image other than a monolithic, war-trodden Middle-East:

There are certain people who are just ignorant. They are affected by what they hear in the media, in the news, and what they hear from other people. So if you tell them [that you are from the Middle-East], the first thing that pops into their mind is: Hey, Syria—there is a war there, you know? [name of country] is adjacent to Syria, so they think [name of country] is also at war. So even to a woman who had visited my country, I had to emphasize that [name of country] does not have anything going on right now. And we hope that nothing is going to go on there, you know? So I had to emphasize this point, just to let her know: hey, don't mix stuff up. Most people are ignorant. I would say few people actually know about the distribution of countries or maybe the culture and significance of each country. Some people are curious to know, so they would ask questions and other people, they just don't want to know. (Heba, Individual Interview, April 2017)

This conversation with Heba reminded me of the many times people confused Iran with Iraq and just assumed that a war was going on in Iran. I tried to understand their occasional confusion regarding where countries are on the map or where their political borders are located. However, the astonishing point for me is: at least know your enemies. The US was at war with Iraq for some period of time, and Iran is a constant special feature in the US news for all the wrong reasons. If not any other country, it is worthwhile to know these two countries' geographical locations and distinctions. In other words, know who you are fighting (literally and figuratively) and why.

Until the 1990s, the othering of Muslims was mainly rooted in the national, cultural, and racial differences embedded in orientalist discourse. The attack on the twin towers gave this form of prejudice and discrimination a religious spin (Afshar, 2008). Moreover, theories such as Huntington's proposition of an imminent clash between Islamic and western civilizations fueled

the legitimacy of Islamophobia. Being exposed to such ideologies, the 9/11 attacks became a defining moment that validated theories of an eternal divide and unavoidable conflict between predominantly Muslim countries and western states (Ahmed, 2007). Rather than initiating Islamophobia, the 9/11 attacks rechanneled existing antagonistic attitudes and served as a catalyst to justify such views (Afshar, 2008). Afshar (2008) claimed that Islam effectively came to the forefront of attention and replaced the orient in political discourse and media representation. Islam was represented as a belief system with backward and barbaric practices and essentialized as the ‘other’ who shared no common values with the rest of the world, particularly the west. Accordingly, Islamophobia developed on the general assumption that Islam, now representing the orient, was a monolithic religion lacking the shared values of other faiths. Lastly, Islam was understood as a militant political ideology that supports terrorism and violence (Ahmed, 2007). This idea of a barbaric Islam, inferior to western values, is intricately linked to the notion of a homogenous, backward orient. While the construct of the orient itself is problematic, in a general sense it referred to the countries located in the Middle-East (Said, 1979).

Such assumptions are pervasive to the point that even among the college-educated population pursuing or holding graduate degrees, common stereotypes overshadow their understanding of the Middle-East and Muslims. Heba recalled one such incident with frustration:

My colleagues, you know, they don't really ask you about your culture. I told you this story before: there's this doctor in my department. He just assumed that because I'm Muslim that all the people in my country are Muslim. And because we are Muslim, it's kind of odd to have a woman pursuing a Master's degree. So he asked me, "Is it normal in your country that people actually are pursuing their Master's degrees? Women are pursuing their Master's degrees?" So I told him that, actually, it's very normal. Most of us are going

abroad and getting a Ph.D. My country isn't only Muslim. So there's always these assumptions that people have and stereotypes associated with everything. So I feel like there should be a lot of space or a chance to get people to know more about us, about Muslims in general. Like our identity doesn't make us, doesn't limit us, from anything.
(Heba, Individual Interview, April 2017)

This conversation between Heba and one of the faculty of her department featured various levels of stereotypes regarding the Middle-East, Muslims, and (in particular) Muslim women. It assumes a monolithic and essentially backward identity of the orient, in which the oppression of women is a given. The first misconception equates being Middle-Eastern and Muslim, and assumes that all the people from the Middle-East are Muslim. The second question is a manifestation of a long-standing construction of a backward orient that places little value on science, discovery, and education (Cobb, 2007; King, 1999; Koshul, 2007; Said, 1979).

Last but not least is the recurring question regarding Muslim women and their right to education. In addition to the multiple layers of misconceptions and stereotypes that feed such inquiries, how these questions were asked is of more significance. As Heba, Najma, and I were discussing the common questions we encounter on a daily basis, a source of irritation for us all is that most people did not ask to learn about the reality; they often asked questions in order to validate their perceptions. We are then tasked with the responsibility to deconstruct and reconstruct the orient. Regardless of our response, as Said (1979) explained, the orient remains an *abstract unshakeable maxim*. If our response does not match their expectations, we become an anomaly to the rule. After all, the orient is what the west has historically constructed, not the reality of its diverse inhabitants (Karimi, 2016).

Before 9/11, Perry (2014) argued that very little explicit violence was targeted toward Muslims. They were a mainly unnoticed and ignored minority group. However, the September 11th attacks changed this situation so that Muslims became the number one enemy and the eternal 'other.' While the invocation of such sentiments was a result of the 9/11 attacks, this deep-rooted fear and insistence on Muslims symbolizing anti-Americanism evoked the complicated history of US-Middle-East relations. Historically, Middle-Eastern identities have been constructed as the alien other, oftentimes violent and inferior to the west. These neo-racist sentiments underlined an irrefutable divide between anything western and non-western. Its manifestation includes (but is not limited to) skin pigmentation. It goes beyond the white/non-white divide to include western versus anything related or connected to the third world. This sense of difference not only created separation and divide but also encompassed a feeling of superiority over this alien 'other' which justified hostility and violence toward it (Perry, 2014). These feelings of mistrust, on the other hand, trickled into the Muslim world, in which reports show that they hold a negative view toward western countries as well. While there is real reason behind much of this antagonism such as terrorist attacks or US invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, much of this antagonism has, in fact, become a war of ideologies. With the passage of time, this relationship has become a cyclical movement of actions and reactions that have reinforced mutual hostility (Nimer, 2007). In other words, "Anti-Americanism and Islamophobia share a common denominator: both are used as strategic weapons in the war of ideas, particularly among people who stand on radical sides of the political/ideological spectrum, both in Muslim societies and in the United States." (Safi, 2007, p. 21)

As previously mentioned, the formation of Islamophobic tendencies is closely linked to immigration patterns in Europe and the US. Similar to other immigrants, Muslims are viewed as

outsiders. Their outsider status triggered anti-Muslim sentiments that can be summarized as anti-immigrant racism (Rana, 2007). However, what makes the case of Muslims unique and differentiates their position from other immigrant populations is that even amongst immigrant and minority groups, Muslims are presented as different, a new case that presents novel challenges to the liberal west (Ho, 2007). Hence, their lives in western countries features distinct complications and controversies. To clarify this point, Khiabany and Williamson (2008) argued that Muslims are constructed as a homogeneous block in western media with backward practices that clash with modernity and civilization; thus, they are continuously under attack as a minority group that refuses to assimilate into and adapt to the mainstream practices of the context they live in. Due to this Islamophobic scrutiny, under which non-Muslims feel threatened from the presence of their Muslim neighbors, the Muslim community is relegated as outsiders who do not belong in this society; consequently, Muslims feel more and more alienated (Afshar, 2008). As a result of this alienation, Muslims living in western countries oftentimes find themselves at the crossroads of difficult decisions: whether or not to abandon their beliefs or let go of their national affiliation (Afshar, Aitken, & Franks, 2005; Sirin & Fine, 2008).

For Muslim women immigrants, notions of nationality, ethnic backgrounds, and religious affiliation are complicated even further. They are subjected to racism because of their background, despite the fact that they do not necessarily identify with their ethnic and national roots. They are restricted to boxed identities and limited categories of who they should be, even though they view themselves in a more complex light than merely belonging to a one-dimensional national or ethnic group (Afshar, Aitken, & Franks, 2005; Sirin & Fine, 2008). Similar to most minority groups, Muslim women are measured against the white, heterosexual, male, and Christian majority culture. However, Muslim women are effectively caught in a catch-22 cycle. If they choose to defy the

common stereotypes regarding Muslim women, they are viewed as too assertive and aggressive. If they show signs of a strong character, they validate the stereotypes of a violent, untrustworthy Muslim. On the other hand, if they choose to be passive, they reinforce what the public perceives a Muslim woman to be (Aziz, 2015).

Another challenge that Muslim women from different racial/ethnic backgrounds face is the disparity between how they view themselves and how they are perceived by society. Due to the color of their skin, they become an automatic 'other.' An 'other' forced to represent a whole nation. She is no longer an individual, but rather a whole nation. She is given an imposed identity, through which the outside world interacts with her. This is often accompanied by a gaze that reinforces her otherness. Her transnational identity intersects with strict anti-immigration sentiments and global anti-Islam rhetoric. Accordingly, immigrant Muslim women face the repercussions of Islamophobia in a harsher light compared to their African-American sisters, Karim (2009) argued. In the US, immigrant Muslim women and their form of covering signals Islam and foreignness, while African-American women's covering represents their ethnic identity. According to Karim (2009), after 9/11 it was better to be an African-American Muslim than an immigrant Muslim. In a climate of intense essentialization of Islam and the politicization of Middle-Eastern cultures, African-Americans were considered more American than Muslim. Immigrant Muslims were viewed as alien and foreign. In this climate, at the intersectionality of culture, race, gender, religion, and nationality, international hijabi Muslim women face new, complex challenges. They are pushed to adopt different strategies to navigate multiple layers of othering in order to be accepted by mainstream society (Mirza, 2013).

Overall, Muslims face multilayered forms and shapes of marginalization, which are informed by their religion as well as their national, ethnic, cultural, and racial backgrounds.

Positioned at the intersection of different layers of their identity, they are perceived and stereotyped in an increasingly negative light (Cesari, 2004; Ewing, 2008). In the process of being constructed as a homogenous block based on their general background and appearance, they are also placed in a lower caste than their western counterparts. This phenomenon, known as racialization, occurs in the interaction between groups with differing power dynamics. It is a relationship formed between the powerful and the less powerful, through which certain attributes are ascribed to members of a group that are considered to be essentialist in nature. This binding element could be based on race, ethnicity, nationality, immigrant status, or religion. It is a form of gaze, one that looks at groups of people based on a prejudgment. This also relates to Said's (1979) orientalism: a gaze, lens, or outlook through which the west views and understands the east. Garner and Selod (2014) concurred that one of the strongest identifiers of racialization is national origin. One of the ways in which Muslims are racialized in western countries is their discursive exclusion from belonging to the country they live in (e.g., the US). For example, oftentimes Muslim-ness and American-ness are positioned against one another, forcing Muslims to choose one of the two (Garner & Selod, 2014).

For example, one of the recurring phrases that is repeatedly shouted at Najma is "go back home!" As she was reflecting on her emotions regarding this statement, she believed that it did not hurt her as much. In actuality, she did have a home to go back to, and she intended to return to her country after her studies. However, she admitted that her emotions and approach to the matter would have been different if this was her home, if she was a US-born Muslim, or if she had decided to stay in the US after graduation. This triggered a debate on how our experiences as international hijabi Muslim women compared to our US-born sisters. We agreed that US-born Muslim women seemed more comfortable with navigating US culture, as they were more aware of nuanced cultural

cues and subtleties. However, we also knew that the dividing factor between belonging in the US and not belonging was the hijab more so than our national origin. The hijab was the defining characteristic of discursively denying a hijabi Muslim woman her right to a home she chose to reside in and belong to.

Islamophobia and Racism

Within the geopolitical hierarchy established by the global powers, a racist imaginary is formed based on culture rather than biology. The very construction of a generic '*Arab-Middle Eastern-Muslim*' category operates within racist discursive practices: "In this hyphenated space we find the work of racialization of the Other through racializing religion, national origins, ethnicity, phenotypes ('brown' skin) and their intersections" (Sayyid, 2010; Semati, 2010, p. 265). Racialization and racism feature three aspects: first, dividing human race into distinct categories with certain characteristics attributed to each group; second, power relations through which certain characteristics historically become innate and natural to certain groups; and third, discriminatory practices in which certain groups have more access to resources than others (Garner & Selod, 2014). Racism in its modern sense—which is based on the eugenicist philosophy and so-called scientific inquiry into the physical superiority of one race over another—appeared in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This was the secularization of racism, as Rana (2007) called it. Meer (2013) argued, however, that racialization and racism should be viewed in a more inclusive light beyond merely biological attributes and inheritance. He advocated that racism should include cultural norms and practices. In the case of Islamophobia, all of the above aspects apply. Muslims are racialized based on physical appearance, cultural practices, and even nationality. Hence,

understanding religion, in this case Islam, in raced terms requires understanding the relationship between people, culture, and religious practices (Garner & Selod, 2014; Meer, 2013).

Freire's (1970) notion of dehumanization offers an extreme example, when certain groups are negated their fully human image through acts of violence, oppression, discrimination, and injustice. Freire (1970) referred to an actual form of historical dehumanization that neglected certain groups their right to become *fully human* via various forms of oppression. While much of what occurs in the relationship between so-called western and Muslim countries can be explained through Freire's framework, for the purpose of this research I would like to expand upon his conceptualization. For the purpose of this study, I do not refer to the actual *dehumanization*, which is a factual occurrence in many Muslim-majority countries. Instead I conceptualize it as the distortion of our image as fully human. Regardless of the reality of our lived experiences, our cultures, practices, and ways of being are continuously portrayed as less than human. Hence, we are under the constant pressure to explain, justify, or negate this image to prove our full humanity. This image of a less-than-human Muslim has become such a pertinent component of the western consciousness that it manifests itself in various ways including linguistic appropriations. Najma, who is fluent in English and discourse analysis, spoke of the related linguistic appropriation:

*So most of it is the comments that are passed to me, shouted at me under their breath, like I said. Some of them are hard. People have cursed at me. People have shouted different kinds of obscenities. They're just like, "you *beep* Muslim," or "Who is that?" And a lot of times I get, "what is that?" And that really troubles me because I am not a what. I am a person. I get pointed at, just like, "What is that? OMG, did you see that?" And I'm like, okay I get it if I shocked you. I get it. I see it. I get it when it's just a natural reaction. So,*

I'm always apologizing. Sometimes, I am just tired of apologizing for being who I am.

(Najma, Individual Interview, April 2017)

Examples such as these illustrate a deeply-rooted, dehumanized image of Muslims and Muslim women in the public imaginary. This reminds of the documentary “Reel Bad Arabs” (2006), written and narrated by Jack Shaheen. Shaheen explained that because of the way the media presents Muslims and the news relays events happening in the Middle-East, Americans have come to view such events despite their harsh reality, as insignificant as video games. The humanity of these populations is undermined to the point that their mass killing becomes equivalent to bloody massacre in a video game. While Islamophobia and racialization as concepts—and their manifestations in language and behaviors—are not always this extreme, they feature a spectrum of such extreme positions.

Islamophobia, in this sense, is an act of racism that triggers negative attitudes toward Muslims on the basis of physical appearance in addition to different practices (Meer, 2013). Despite the great diversity of Muslims, in terms of nationality, ethnicity, language, and culture, the common discourse on Muslims refers to them as a monolithic group with similar physical characteristics. Further, Islamophobia assumes a universal interpretation of Islam as an ideology detached from its sociocultural environment. The racialization of Muslims occurs through positioning them as the external ‘other,’ who is demonized based on both physical appearance and cultural practices (Rana, 2007). This has been a dilemma for Najma as well. She explained her confusion around this notion of being an external ‘other’ as follows:

I'm not sure. I do think being international makes it worse. I am more adapted locally now, so I don't notice that difference as much. One of my friends, she's a convert, so first she's Muslim, right? But then she's blond, blue eyed. She fits in easier because she's local. Even

though I'm local, once people know that I'm international or because I don't look so local or something just makes it different. It makes it worse or it adds layers, if that makes any sense. (Najma, Focus Group Discussion, October 2017)

For Najma, in addition to being Muslim, the phenotypes commonly attributed to Middle-Eastern identities and international status adds another layer of othering that widens the 'us' versus 'them' divide.

If Islamophobia is to be understood in racialized terms, it is "a cryptic articulation of the concepts of race and racism, even if overtly it appears as a form of religious-based prejudice" (Taras, 2013, p. 422). Islamophobia rarely engages in a religious debate in a meaningful way. It instead feeds on the old belief that Islamic and European values are essentially incompatible, and the inferior Islamic practices could never meet the progressive standards of western society (Taras, 2013). Halliday (1999) argued that if we take a closer look at Islamophobic attitudes, they rarely address the teaching of the Quran or the prophet Muhammad. Such attitudes constitute an attack on Muslims and what Muslims do. Halliday (1999) proposed 'anti-Muslimism' be used rather than 'Islamophobia' because the latter implies that there is one Islam which there is a phobia against. It also obscures any possibility for dialogue, as it overrides critique and dialogue on matters related to Islam that could be classified as Islamophobic. While I agree with certain aspects of Halliday's (1999) arguments, he overlooks the fact that Islamophobes do not actually care about the reality or the actual nature of Islam. To them, what they perceive Islam to be is Islam, and this perceived Islam is dangerous and barbaric; hence, one should be afraid of it.

Islamophobia and Gender

The position of Muslim women in global politics is a rather complicated matter. It has been historically abused to attack Muslim societies, literally and figuratively, in service to imperialistic domination (Terman, 2016). The portrayal of Islam as a misogynistic ideology has been in service of this end goal. Constructing a despot orient that mistreats women justifies imperial rule over it. It follows that Muslim women's bodies have been a war zone of colonial rule, and liberating women has always been on top of the list for civilizing the backward orient (Ho, 2007). Such rhetoric has positioned Muslim women at the heart of complicated global relations between the civilized western states and barbaric, predominantly-Muslim countries. As the discourse of women's rights occurs amidst anti-Muslim racism and the demonization of Arab and Islamic cultures, Muslim women find themselves at the crossroads of making an unfair decision: to accept one aspect of their identity while rejecting the other (Ho, 2007). Muslim women are constantly negotiating a contested state between colonial and feminist frameworks, having to protect their beliefs, their sense of agency, their nationalities, and their very identities (Afshar, 2008). As debates on their positionality, agency, and rights ensue, hijabi Muslim women become increasingly essentialized as the embodiment of the 'other.' Oftentimes, their hijab signals extremism, traditionalism, oppression, or backwardness. Discussions on the notion of hijab are presented in a dehistoricized and decontextualized manner that overlooks the complicated histories of colonialism, geopolitical relations, and patriarchal practices in western countries. Razack (2005) clarified that such discourse is rooted in the Enlightenment narrative of progress in which 'we' (Euro-American societies) are reasonable, logical, and modern, as opposed to 'them' (third-world countries); hence, they need 'us' to train and discipline 'them.' As a result, the Muslim woman's body becomes a weapon to be taken advantage of for political debate. Additionally, in private

spheres, people assume that they know what is best for the Muslim woman: what she needs and what she wants. What is left out of the conversation is the Muslim woman's choice regarding covering and her position and approach toward it (Mirza, 2013).

The prevalence of such societal discourse and the absence of Muslim women's voices places Muslim women under constant pressure of explaining themselves. As previously mentioned, the common tendency is that people ask questions to reinforce the common perception they hold, rather than relearn the misinformation they were exposed to. This burden of constant self-justification has discouraged Najma from any effort to raise awareness about Islam and bridge this gap of ignorance:

I am just a person. You can tell, it's been five plus years and I'm tired at this point. There's a lot of times I feel that despite all my efforts, I used to be much more active in talking to people and bridging all of this and stuff. I just mean on a general scale, despite all of that, I am bending myself backward trying to make ourselves more known, or I don't want to say more acceptable because I feel like we should not morph ourselves to an acceptable version of what society wants us to be, whether it's our religion, culture or ethnicity. I feel like who we are is perfectly correct, perfectly right in its way, and we need to pass that forward to people rather than conform. I don't know what it's called, this strange compliance. And you can hear my tone now, it frustrates me. But I just feel like, so many times, it just feels futile. (Najma, Individual Interview, April 2017)

In the popular imaginary, Muslim women are viewed according to three essentialist categories: the exotic sexualized 'other,' the oppressed woman, or the militant woman. The first construct is rooted in the history of colonialism, where oriental women became the subject of sexual fantasy for the colonizer. Like many other women, Muslim women are also reduced to their

bodies and sexuality; however, they are simultaneously exoticized and further sexualized through imagery and symbolism of harems and belly dancing. The second category stands in stark contrast to the first. As opposed to the sexually-alluring belly dancer, the other popular image of the Muslim women is of a covered, oppressed object. While Muslim men are portrayed as barbaric and backward, Muslim women become the voiceless targets of male savagery. This is not to mention how such rationalization has historically been (and still is) the justifying reason for waging war against and colonizing many Eastern countries. In a paradoxical positioning, the third image of Muslim women that has become prevalent in public imaginary, is of the militant Muslim woman. In this case, not only she does not need to be saved, but the world needs to be saved from her.

As I discuss the experiences of Heba and Najma, I will delve deeper into how they are constantly navigating these extremes and required to make choices based on either/or scenarios. In this capacity, Islamophobia becomes gendered. What makes gender an increasingly important topic in discussions regarding Islamophobia is the notion of hijab, or the covering of Muslim women. The hijab plays an integral role as it serves as covering factor that literally and figuratively hides and masks potential acts of terror. As the hijab becomes an unknown space, paired with media images of terrorist women, it becomes a reason for suspicion and fear (Perry, 2014).

Islamophobia and the Notion of Hijab

Similar to any other social or personal matter, the notion of hijab and the choice to adhere to it is complicated and multidimensional. Grounded in a multitude of social, cultural, spiritual, and familial factors, Muslim women either choose to wear the hijab or disregard it (Abu Bakr, 2014). However, as Perry (2014) explained, with little to no information on the veil, its reasons and implications, the hijab has become the defining and dividing symbol of the progressive west

and the backward east/Islam. Hence, the hijab is often understood as a symbol of the backward, submissive Muslim woman. As a result, Muslim women, particularly those who cover, become the ultimate powerless victims in need of saving from their violent fellow men. With this mentality, in addition to Islam itself, the notion of hijab is also essentialized through western colonial and orientalist discourse. The matter is almost exclusively viewed from a western standpoint, with little attention to the complexity of how Muslim women with their full diversity approach and understand it (Afshar, 2008). Abu Bakr (2014) added, since the notion of wearing the hijab is looked at and analyzed through an overly simplistic and essentialist lens, the experiences of Muslim women who cover are consequently brushed over with a universalistic strike of similarity. In colonial discourse, hijab is the signifier of women's oppression in Islam and a sign of Islam's inferiority to western, modern, and progressive thought (Abu Bakr, 2014; Yegenoglu, 2003). In order to reject this mentality, there is a tendency to overlook the masculine undertone of many narratives on hijab and Muslim women covering, both on the part of those in favor of it and those who are against it. To reclaim the concept of hijab from colonial and masculine discourse, it needs to be *feminized* through the diverse voices of women who choose it as their form of covering (Abu Bakr, 2014). For example, for many Muslim women, their religious choices are a private, spiritual matter through which they draw strength and support in times of need. This is in stark contrast with the hegemonic discourse perpetuated by western colonial values that view the hijab as a symbol of submissiveness and subordination.

The main premise in dealing with Muslim women is that they have no agency and choice. This lack of power in making decisions paints a stereotypical portrayal of Muslim women with little resemblance to reality. It also reiterates and reinforces colonial and patriarchal rhetoric, stripping Muslim women of their right to exercise free will, not only in their choice of attire, but

also in what they see as oppression and how they would like to deal with it (Afshar, 2008). To contend this, Zimmerman (2014) posited that while the hijab has come to symbolize the oppression of Muslim women in the western imaginary, to many Muslim women it is a conscious choice of asserting their agency. Through the hijab they challenge the dominant sexist discourse in society while asserting their pride in their ethnic identity. They re-appropriate the hijab to challenge the dominant societal discourse, contest the systemic vilification of Muslims, detach it from its stigma, and associate it with the positive meaning of liberation. They also utilize the hijab as a means to reassert their identities on an individual basis (Afshar, Aitken, & Franks, 2005; Mirza, 2013). The underlying premise in all these scholars' arguments is that despite the common misconception, choosing to cover is a conscious choice that Muslim women make based on a variety of reasons (Afshar, Aitken & Franks, 2005; Mirza, 2013; Zimmerman, 2014). Hence, in many cases it is a means for Muslim women to reclaim their agency.

Moreover, what is often absent from western discourse regarding the hijab is the sociopolitical movements by Muslim women regarding the notion of hijab. During the twentieth century, women in the Middle-East showed fierce opposition to the hijab while they became its greatest supporters in the twenty-first century. These movements occurred in response to the larger sociopolitical discourse on the hijab (Afshar, 2008). The underlying premise of these movements was Muslim women reclaiming their agency in what they believe to be their right. For example, in Iran, the king before the last, Reza Shah, banned the hijab. At the time, women opposed this policy to the point that the Shah was forced to repeal it. On the other hand, under the current regime, which mandates wearing the hijab, women have continued to fight for their rights in different capacities and continue to reclaim how they cover. Far from the image of a passive and submissive woman, Muslim women have continuously resisted any policy, law, or discourse that

contradicted their self-determining agency. Beyond the Middle-East, Muslim women living under numerous governments have refused to accept laws and policies that undermine their choice of attire. The movement against the banning of the veil in France is an example.

As I spoke with Heba and Najma about choosing to cover, we referenced many of the points mentioned in the literature. For both, the hijab is a symbol of their Muslim identity and they both feel pride in asserting this identity, despite the sociopolitical rhetoric that continuously vilifies the hijab. Heba and Najma take pride in the assertion of their Muslim identity. In addition to pride, Heba also views the hijab as a source of respect. She views herself as more respectable with her hijab on. Najma's choice of covering is to show her submission to Allah. She talks about a critical phase in her early twenties when she started questioning everything and relearning what she had been taught. This turmoil brought her to her current state of internal peace with the practices she adheres to. Furthermore, both Heba and Najma agreed that choosing to wear the hijab was neither the most comfortable nor the easiest option within the US context. Heba emphasized this point by showing her support for Najma, who wears the niqab² (face covering): *"It is easier to be non-hijabi here and I can't imagine how it is to be niqabi."* Heba also referenced her own internal dialogue regarding the removal of her hijab due to societal pressure; however, she concluded, *"I never did, and I don't think I will."* The irony is that the very discourse that claims to support the freedom of choice and rights of Muslim women has become the force that is stripping them of their agency. While neither explicitly mention their choice of attire as a form of resistance or a political act, it is implied in their choice to swim against the waves despite the odds and the pride they feel in doing so.

² Niqab is a garment of clothing that covers the face, worn by some Muslim women.

The veil has always occupied a significant position in discussions on Islam and Muslims. In addition to being the symbol of an exotic ‘other,’ the oppression of women, and a sign of danger, the hijab has also come to be viewed as an indicator of Muslim people’s stubbornness to integrate into western society. It is also viewed as a stance against western culture, therefore deepening the divide between ‘us’ and ‘them.’ Often times, this threat is viewed as minorities disrupting our way of life which goes against values of multiculturalism and inclusion. The corresponding assumption is that not only are Muslims a universal alien ‘other,’ but also that ‘our way’ is ‘the way.’ This rhetoric leaves little to no room for conversation about what constitutes the British, American, or European ways (Khiabany & Williamson, 2008). This dogmatic resistance to the many hyphenated identities of Europe and the US also undermines the hyphenated hijabs that Muslim women have created for themselves within these contexts. Many Muslim women have created a hybrid form of hijab that resonates with their daily lives in the contexts they live in (Afshar, Aitken, & Franks, 2005). Unlike the rigid portrayal of Muslim women (and the hijab in particular), Muslim women constantly negotiate their choice of attire. This matter is even further complicated for international Muslim women. For example, Heba mentioned that during her early days in the US she observed American girls’ fashion and skimmed through fashion magazines to better understand the dress code of her new context. Then she tried to buy and mix and match these clothing items in order to create a space in which she was both fashionable and adhered to the hijab. I think of all the bright colors I began to wear since I left Iran. This has been my conscious stance against the universal image of the Muslim woman covered in black. This has simultaneously been my act of resistance and peace offering. I wanted people to see a cheerful and colorful Muslim woman that contradicted the images they were constantly exposed to in media. However, in addition to all the conscious

choices and decisions, deep down for Heba and me, all this was also a means to prove to the US that we were nice and peaceful.

In the following chapter, I discuss the theoretical framework I use to ground my work. I adopt post-colonial theory as a theoretical lens to analyze and understand our (Heba's, Najma's, & my) experiences. I explain my personal journey to post-colonial theory, the history of the theory, its formation, implications, and purpose. As I refer to literature for a conceptualization of post-colonial theory, I describe my understanding of the theory and I how I use it to navigate the stories articulated in this research. In doing so, I try to make sense of our lived experiences as international hijabi Muslim women studying in the US. Based on the topic of this research, I focus on three identity markers—nationality (in this case, Middle-Eastern), religion (in this case, Islam), and gender (in this case, women) in relation to colonial discourse in an attempt to formulate a different conceptualization of these matters.

CHAPTER 3. POSTCOLONIAL THEORY

Introduction

Said's (1979) *Orientalism* was my initial encounter with postcolonial theory. In fact, my acquaintance Said was not academic in nature. I mean this in the sense that I was not searching for a theoretical framework that fit my research. Furthermore, I was not introduced to Said through a class or course that I was taking. I learned about Said (1979) through conversations with a friend in the English Department. Said's (1979) *Orientalism* was love at first sight for me. Although I have had to revisit and analyze this love as I engaged deeper with Said's other work and related scholarship, nevertheless, *Orientalism* became the foundation of how I approach and understand my academic endeavors, including this dissertation.

I began reading Said to make sense of my own experiences and understand the climate of rhetoric I was immersed in. Two prominent features of Said's work convinced me to adopt his theories as the conceptual foundation of my work. First, the prevalence of orientalist mentality approximately forty years after *Orientalism* was first published. Despite great advancements in telecommunication technology, the othering of Middle-Eastern identities prevail. This points to a deeply-conflicted east/west relationship, the highly politicized discourse surrounding the matter, and a cultural perspective that is deeply rooted in the general public. Second, the personal connection and proximity I felt with both Said's experiences and work. He has a deep understanding and keen analysis of issues broadly related to immigration, the Middle-East, east/west relations, global politics, and Middle-Eastern identities, particularly of those living in the

US. Hence, Said became a lens for me to understand and analyze my personal experiences, as well as a motivation to learn about and engage with related scholarship.

Said's (1979) *Orientalism* was my introduction to the line of work broadly known as postcolonial theory. When reading postcolonial literature, I was consciously looking for a theoretical grounding for my research as well as a framework that would address the puzzle of my own lived experiences. In short, I was looking for a theoretical conceptualization that made sense to me both personally and academically. Postcolonial theory was exactly that. Postcolonial theory provided me with the language necessary to understand and analyze global power relations, sociohistorical rhetoric that is a legacy of this power imbalance, and how societal structures are built and maintained around this power structure.

Such established frameworks of power relations inform our very existence, how we view ourselves, and how we communicate with the outside world. For example, in my discussions with Heba and Najma, we shared an awareness of what it meant to be a Muslim woman from the Middle-East. We knew of the reputation that preceded us and the burden it placed on us to deconstruct and reconstruct these myths. For example, we were aware of the global discourse around Islam and its related stereotypes. We knew that within the public imaginary, our hijabs did not signal freedom of choice, control over our bodies, or modesty. Hence, our interactions with people often included a first step of dismantling the prevailing stereotypes. This individual effort we all faced on a daily basis is what this research aims to do on a larger, more systematic scale: to paint a more realistic image of what it means to be a hijabi Muslim woman from a Middle-Eastern country.

The following chapter is an account of how I conceptualize postcolonial theory, particularly in relation to the topic of this research. In an attempt to understand postcolonialism

and postcolonial theory, I begin this chapter with a conceptualization of colonialism itself. I provide sociopolitical, historical, and economic accounts of colonialism and how it informs our contemporary thinking and living. I proceed to conceptualize postcolonialism as an ongoing project that attempts to resist the ideological and structural frameworks of domination that remain a legacy of the colonial era. Based on this understanding, I argue that postcolonialism has a timeless quality to it and as a result, transcends time. I then continue to explain how these conditions have laid the foundation for a new line of theory to be born. Said's ground breaking book, *Orientalism*, initiated the conversation in a way that led to the conceptualization and adoption of postcolonial theory in many fields.

As I position the discussion of colonialism and postcolonialism within the global rhetoric of power relations, domination, and hegemony, I integrate issues of nationality, religion, and gender. I explain how colonial discourse continues to frame how people make sense of these three identity markers. I then discuss the intersectionality of nationality and religion (Islam) and how it informs the experiences of Muslim women from so-called third-world countries. I intend to establish an understanding of how historical sociocultural power dynamics affect the lives of international Muslim females studying in US institutions of higher education.

I use the term *so-called third-world countries*, as even in the numeric positioning of countries, certain contexts come first while others are third world. This also points to the center of recognition, in which from the perspective of the western world, 'others' are second or third in comparison. As Dasen and Akkari (2008) explained, while western countries are minorities in the global population, they have historically had the privilege to define how the rest of the world is talked about. However, for the purposes of this dissertation, given its postcolonial theoretical stance and its intent to disrupt the established global hierarchies, I use the term 'majority world'

to refer to those countries that have historically been called third world or developing nations. ‘Majority world’ basically refers to non-western countries. I adopt the term ‘majority world’ in my dissertation for the following three reasons: a) the term majority is democratic and liberating in tone; b) it destabilizes center and periphery in the way they have historically been conceptualized; c) it moves beyond the west/non-west divide to include all marginalized populations (e.g., indigenous populations) (Dasen & Akkari, 2008).

Conceptualizing Colonialism

To understand colonialism/postcolonialism as a phenomenon and postcolonial theory as an attempt to decipher, explain, and potentially transcend and supersede it, we need to take a journey back in time. This journey is an attempt to find the roots of colonialism in order to make sense of what followed. The journey to find the starting point of colonialism can take us back to the time of the Incas, the Ottomans, and the Chinese. If we push the boundaries even more, we could continue even further back in time (Childs & Williams, 1997). However, a cutoff date is necessary given that we academics and humans in general exist in a world bound by time and space. Based on these limitations, in this chapter I use the term colonialism to refer to the process of taking over territories by European countries such as Britain, France, Spain, Portugal, and Germany starting from the sixteenth century and continuing well into the twentieth century (Childs & Williams, 1997).

I choose to focus on this particular period of time for a multitude of reasons. First, the widespread phenomenon of Europe taking over the world occurred to a degree that could no longer be ignored or overlooked. By the nineteenth century, approximately half of the world’s territories and resources were owned, controlled, and dominated by certain European powers (e.g. Britain,

France, and Spain) (Childs & Williams, 1997; Gandhi, 1998). In addition to the physical exploitation of land and resources, or, as Tuck and Yang (2012) call it, *external colonialism*, this process of colonization included a far more important underpinning ideology: an ontological and epistemological worldview that justified waging war, taking over the resources of the colonies, and civilizing their backward natives. The colonial intent was not only to teach the natives “the right ways of living and being” but also to strip them of their primitive practices, a mission and mentality that continues to this very day (Said, 1994; Stam & Shohat, 2012). To clarify these points, I discuss how the past and the present relate to and inform one another, how they are entangled in a complex sociopolitical setting, and exist within a framework of power relations. As Said (1994) perfectly articulated:

Appeals to the past are the commonest of strategies in interpretation of the present. What animates such appeals is not only disagreement about what happened in the past and what the past was, but uncertainty about whether the past really is past, over and concluded, or whether it continues, albeit in different forms, perhaps. This problem animates all sorts of discussions—about influence, about blame and judgement, about present actualities and future priorities. (p. 3)

Conceptualizing colonialism requires a complicated understanding of the interplay between power structures and how people’s realities are constructed. When we think of power structures at an international level, we often consider political and economic superiority. While these two factors play significant roles in any relation, particularly within domination/subjugation rhetoric, they are not the only players of the game. When considered as a game, colonialism and imperialism feature many tactics and strategies that involve a multitude of players. These players perform individually and complementary to one another based on their common goals. This goal

is often misunderstood in terms of material gain and resource exploitation. Although both are considered as important goals of the colonization process, there is more to the story (Connell, 2014; Rizvi, Lingard, & Lavia, 2006; Said, 1994).

One such mechanism, arguably the most important, is the ideological formation of the superiority of certain groups of people and their ways of being over others. Said (1979) used the post structural premise that such constructions are discursively created through history and continue to dominate the minds of people in terms of how they view themselves and others. First and foremost, this ideology feeds two undergirding notions: binary oppositions and hierarchies. Binaries in the sense that everything is viewed and understood in binaries. The greatest binary of all is west vs. east. In this sense, the orient is a construct made by the west, for the west. It only assumes meaning and reality as it is defined and created by the west. In this mindset, the orient is positioned as the essential 'other.' An 'other' that in the hierarchical structure is inferior to the civilized west, in need of being saved from its own backward, barbaric practices. For many, this imperative creates a metaphysical urgency to rescue the people of the east, who *need, should, and want* to be subjugated, controlled, and ruled over (Said, 1994). As Muslim women from the Middle-East, Heba, Najma, and I agreed that we are constantly compared to a standard image of what is acceptable. It follows that our choice of attire and practices are unequivocally rejected based on western standards. As a result, we are constantly attempting to prove that we are 'normal' or trying to fit the rubric.

However, colonization could not and cannot survive merely on the colonizers' urge to dominate. Hence, a relationship is formed that is very similar to Hegel's 'master-slave relationship' (Gandhi, 1998). In this relationship the master sets the rules, decides the roles and responsibilities, defines the parameters of the relationship, and ultimately evaluates the very worth of the slave.

The slave exists for the master. The slave's existence would be meaningless without the master. Under these circumstances, can the slave be blamed for wanting to become the master and *be* the master? This relationship became the underlying philosophy of how the west dealt with the rest of the world (Gandhi, 1998). This two-way street could be considered the more significant tragedy. This colonizing mentality has influenced the colonized as well as the colonizer for centuries. It has continuously reinforced Eurocentric ideologies, ways of being, and values to the point that the colonized aspire to become the colonizer, identical to the master-slave relationship. Bhabha (1984) also described this process as mimicry, in which the colonized imitates and mimics the colonizer, aspiring to become a reformed and recognizable version "as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite" (p. 126).

There lie two underlying notions in the relationship described above. First, as Bhabha (1984) pointed out, there is an inherent regulating and disciplinary mentality which normalizes the colonial state and appropriates the 'other.' Second, the relationship is an indication of how the colonized has come to internalize the constructed hierarchy in which s/he is always inferior. The only way to escape it is to become the colonizer. This mentality is evident in how cultural practices are portrayed. More often than not, eastern cultures are considered too sensual, too emotional, and—to further devalue them—too feminine (Said, 1979). Such characteristics are ascribed to the east, first to position its people as the binary opposite, the 'other.' A position that has exclusion in heart; they are not one of 'us.' Also, as previously mentioned, to define their value in relation to 'us' which gives 'us' the right or even the responsibility to dominate and control them. Furthermore, positioning them in the constant struggle to become one of 'us,' never yet enough. This is the discourse that Heba, Najma, and I continuously navigate. We are constantly defending our countries' image against the prevailing orientalist image of normal. Moreover, we are proving

our worth and agency as minority women in a system that is patriarchal in structure and white in culture. In short, we are struggling to be seen and accepted as normal. I will provide a more detailed description of whiteness as a construct in subsequent sections. However, in the general sense I refer to the historical construct closely related to westernness that features a hegemonic ‘othering’ of majority people (Ang, 2003).

Before I move on, I need to clarify one point. I understand that this discursive construction of the west and the east is extremely simplistic, essentialist, and limiting in understanding the complex sociohistorical interplay of power and politics. In fact, the construction is very colonial in nature. It is colonial in the sense that it is enmeshed with colonial thinking where everything and everyone exist in dichotomies. In the heart of these dichotomies lies an ‘us’ versus ‘them,’ ‘east’ vs. ‘west,’ ‘logic/reason’ vs. ‘emotion,’ ‘civilized’ vs. ‘uncivilized,’ and last but not least, ‘masculine’ vs. ‘feminine’ (Bhambra, 2015; Dirlik, 1994). This very mode of thinking has justified wars, bloodshed, the oppression of minorities, and the subjugation of women.

Despite the efforts of many postcolonial and indigenous scholars (see Grande, 2008) to create a space that serves as an epistemological bridge between the colonizer and the colonized, colonial frames of reference continue to dominate our institutions and thought processes. Said (1979) described, “Institution, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles support the western discourse” (p. 2). The attitudes and discourse of the colonized as well as the colonizers are intertwined with these western positivistic premises (Kennedy, 1996). Accordingly, I will continue to use these words with their essentialist appearance for two main reasons: first, to provide a concrete example of colonial discursive patterns in everyday life; and second, to refer to an epistemological stance that has historically created an essential ‘other.’

However, I acknowledge the complexity of the matter and will discuss it more deeply as we proceed.

As previously explained, colonialism is far more complex than the physical occupation of one's territory by another nation. To engage in this conversation, I would like to begin with how I conceptualize colonialism. To me, colonialism is a state of mind. It is a mode of thinking through which we make sense of ourselves and the world. It is a lens through which we see. Through this lens we establish relationships. We connect to others, we walk through life, we relate to nature, and we even come to know ourselves. As we make sense of ourselves in the world, we create an understanding of 'others,' too. Based on this knowledge of the self and the 'other,' the Eurocentric mentality came to view itself as the center, the holders of Truth: progressive, modern, and better than the 'rest' of the world. This worldview then became the justification for centuries of war and bloodshed. In colonial reasoning there is a hierarchy of what is right and what is wrong. Certain ways of knowing and being are privileged over others. There are strict guidelines for progress, being civilized, and what constitutes knowledge. People who adhere to these guidelines are the ones who should have (or deserve to have) domination over others (Dirlik, 1994; Fanon, 1963; Gandhi, 1998; Kennedy, 1996; Said, 1979; 1994).

An example of such means of control that is particularly relevant to our lives in academia is the construction of knowledge. This construction of what counts as valuable knowledge happens on a variety of levels. At an ontoepistemological level, the debate of what counts as knowledge—and how it can be attained, discovered, or extracted—has historical roots in the Kantian and Cartesian philosophies of Enlightenment and Rationality (Gandhi, 1998). Both philosophers took a universal, normative approach to human existence and ignored its heterogeneity, historicity, and contextuality. Such modes of thinking, which became the philosophical underpinning of western

academia, value certain ways of knowing over others (e.g. scientific method vs. non-scientific, written traditions vs. oral). In this mode of thinking, rational thought is considered superior to alternate ways of experiencing the world (e.g., sensuality and emotionality as valid forms of knowing). It is worth noting that rationality also creates a hierarchy in terms of who is more human than the ‘other.’ Needless to say, the European mature adult always has privilege over the immature colonized ‘other.’ Based on an unequal power dynamic and abstract criteria, western institutions of higher education are constantly ranked as the top institutions in the world. As a result, their degrees are considered more valuable and their graduates more desirable than peers coming from universities in the east. This continues to propagate the hierarchy in terms of whose knowledge is more valuable and valid (Connell, 2014; Gandhi, 1998).

If I sound angry, it is because I am. Such emotions should have no place in my academic and objective research. In fact, I should be nowhere to be seen in this paper. Why does my passion keep pouring into my words? Maybe I should try harder: try harder to be more objective, more scientific, and more rigorous. I say all this to explain that my conceptions of colonialism and postcolonialism have been filtered through me. My passion and emotions may have presented a very dark and gloomy picture. While there is some bitter reality to it, the entire picture is not all sad and depressing. Throughout history there has always been resistance and people on both sides who have chosen to break free from these hegemonic ideologies and practices.

Understanding colonialism—its impact on the individual and society, and how we can move beyond it—is complex. It requires knowledge of history, philosophy, linguistics, art, and literature. It calls for an understanding of politics, economics, and social relations on local and global scales (Dirlik, 1994; Said, 1994). To create an in-depth understanding of Heba, Najma, and my experiences, we need to understand the political relations between each of our countries and

the US, the economic statuses of our respective countries, and our socioeconomic statuses as individuals. Our mastery of English as a second language also relates to how we navigate life in the US. This does not discard the attempt to make sense of the conditions that we live in, despite their complicated nature. This is a challenge that many scholars have taken on to engage in the conversation in a meaningful way. Meaningful in the sense that it lays the ground for change (Gandhi, 1998; Prakash, 1994; Stam & Shohat, 2012).

Conceptualizing Postcolonialism

The ‘post’ in the term postcolonial begs the question: *when is the postcolonial?* Is it a condition we are currently living in? Is it a utopian state we will experience in the future? Is it a vision we wish to actualize as we live life (having roots in the present moment and thriving branches in the future)? Or was it an event or occurrence of the past for us to observe, reminisce on, and learn from? The answers to these questions can be as simplistic or complicated as we make them. The simple response would be *all of the above*. As straightforward as this response seems, complications occur. How can postcolonialism be a state, condition, event, occurrence, and vision all at the same time? How can it simultaneously exist in the past, present, and the future? I guess there is no simple way around this question; hence, the complex response.

As I mentioned earlier, the ‘post’ in postcolonial is pregnant with time. It implies a chronological order: being after colonialism. So there needs to be a state of colonialism in the past for the present to be a condition of postcolonialism. The more obvious interpretation of the term positions it in space and time. Generally speaking, it refers to a time period after colonialism, when many countries (e.g. India, Algeria, and Latin America) gained independence from their colonizers. In this sense, colonialism is viewed in light of the physical occupation of a bordered

space by another (Childs & Williams, 1997; Rizvi, Lingard & Lavia, 2006). Consequently, postcolonial is a time/space that follows. According to the rules of logic, the postcolonial is now (Armitage, 2007; Childs & Williams, 1997). If only this positivistic, linear, rational thinking rooted in the European Enlightenment was true (Gandhi, 1998). If only the ‘third-worlders’ hadn’t rocked the boat to complicate the ‘Truth’ (a universal, capital ‘T’ Truth that can be accessed via the scientific method and rational inquiry), the postcolonial would be now and we could all relax (or even celebrate) because colonialism would be over (Gandhi, 1998). However, many scholars argue otherwise. In the following section, I explore a different interpretation of the word and its conceptualization.

If we live and rationalize within colonial structures, then when is the postcolonial? The Fanonic response to this question is *never*. Fanon (1963) believed it was a myth that liberation from the colonizer resulted in freedom for the colonized. Two arguments can be posited to support this claim. The first is what was mentioned above: the colonizer and the colonized continue to function within the colonial regime of thought. Second, Fanon (1963) posited that ‘national consciousness’ fails to achieve freedom as the colonial bourgeoisie continue to rule the public through the same methods of domination, subordination, surveillance, and coercion. Both arguments point to Foucault’s (1977) conceptualization of discipline and punish: human beings live in an entangled web of power relations that becomes the air we breathe and the essence of our lives.

In addition to Fanon’s (1963) skeptical approach toward the matter, Spivak (2006) also tends to be cynical regarding the decolonizing mission. For her, arriving at a postcolonial state is less plausible than it may appear. Her concern stems from a historical silencing of the subaltern, in her case underprivileged women from developing (!) countries. The danger occurs in

speaking for the subaltern rather than allowing them to speak for themselves. Spivak's (2006) concern was that through the process of decolonization, the subaltern is essentialized through a Eurocentric lens. As a result, postcolonial studies has the potential to become a double-edged sword through which the same hegemonic structures of economic, political, and cultural domination are reinforced and reiterated. Bhabha (1994), in contrast, had a more positive outlook on the matter: the subaltern is not a passive subject to which identity and culture are ascribed. To him, the colonizer and the colonized cannot be viewed as separate entities. Rather they exist and perform in relation to one another. Hence, they mutually influence, shape, and form each other in the process. Although I do believe that both sides have viable arguments to defend, I believe that a postcolonial position does not necessarily need to assume an either/or approach. Despite the reality of living in a colonial aftermath with similar systems of oppression through which the subaltern's voice continues to be marginalized (Prakash, 1994; Spivak, 2006), we cannot—or rather *should* not—give up due to the difficulty and complication of the task ahead (see Grande, 2008).

What we need to acknowledge is that we live in the illusion of a postcolonial era. Many countries, including ex-colonies, enjoy sovereignty and celebrate their independence on an annual basis. While there is value to exerting control over one's land, resources, and (to a certain degree) decisions, this is not a depiction of the whole picture. A second form of colonialism continues to cast its shadow on the realities of all people: the colonizer and the colonized, western and non-western, men and women, rich and poor, academics and non-academics (I chose to keep the simplistic binaries, as it is an indication of how my mind has come to think in binaries often with an underpinning exclusion of the 'other'). This form, more subtle in nature, has been systematically ingrained into the minds of people, their imagining, and their culture—how they understand the

world, how they make sense of it, even in their meaning making of their very selves and identities (Armitage, 2007; Childs & Williams, 1997; Gandhi, 1998; Kennedy, 1996; Said, 1994).

Said (1994) defines this phenomenon as imperialism: “the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory” (p. 9). Based on this definition, colonialism is one manifestation of imperialism. Imperialism can be considered as both the driving ideology behind colonialism and its legacy in the postcolonial aftermath. It complicates the discussion to allow for a more in-depth dialogue on this complex matter. Referring to the traditional definition of colonialism, countries such as the US which are major political, social, and economic players in the international community would not fit under the rubric of the colonizer. In a more traditional definition, the US would be considered as the colonized (Childs & Williams, 1997; Said, 1994). As I engage in this conversation in more complicated manner, I would like to provide an alternate definition of postcolonialism and its conditions.

Considering the above points, I see postcolonialism as a systematic resistance to and disruption of the dominant ideological and discursive patterns of hegemonic othering (Rizvi et al., 2006). I believe it has always been an intricate aspect of human history, whether or not the term itself was applied to these practices (Childs & Williams, 1997). Further, it is an intertwined component of present life as Eurocentric modes of thinking continue to dominate different aspects of modern society, including the media and the academe. Under these circumstances, postcolonial thinking continues to be relevant to dismantling the prevalent structures of oppression and marginalization (Armitage, 2007; Kennedy, 1996; Rizvi et al., 2006; Stam & Shohat, 2012). As a continuous thinking and rethinking of the present with a glance to the past, postcolonialism then becomes a project to imagine a different way of being. As a result, postcolonialism transcends time: it was, still is, and will be. In the previous sections I have discussed the social, political, and

economic conditions that gave birth to postcolonial theory and why it continues to be a relevant discussion. In the following section I talk about its meaning and conceptualization.

Conceptualizing Postcolonial Theory

The culmination of life under colonialism and living in its aftermath called for a new line of theory. Said's (1979) ground-breaking *Orientalism* started a conversation that became the foundation of what is known today as postcolonial theory. Postcolonial theory is adopted and used in many fields, ranging from history, anthropology, literature, and education. It works on multiple layers. First, it attempts to uncover and understand how our systems (academic and non-academic) are entrenched in colonial and neo-colonial ideologies, through which certain knowledge and social identities are legitimized while others are marginalized (Rizvi et al., 2006). Second, embedded in this understanding and unraveling lies a form of resistance that attempts to deconstruct universalistic Eurocentric assumptions and categorizations, disabling the grand narratives of superiority and inferiority constructed by colonialism. Its goal is to disrupt the Eurocentric discourse of appropriating the 'other' (Armitage, 2007; Goulet, 2011; Prakash, 1994). Hence, postcolonial theory is a sociocultural, economic, and political stance that intends to dismantle western domination through the radical rethinking of structures that create and maintain unequal power relations (Kennedy, 1996; Rizvi et al., 2006). It is a position against slavery, racism, and imperialism.

Postcolonial theory is not an answer or *the* answer to the lingering colonial question; rather, it is a dynamic, ever-changing set of questions that contest colonial premises (e.g., the civilizing mission) through transcending and superseding these modes of thinking. It is and has been a liberating movement for many subaltern groups, including Jews, Muslims, Indians, and Africans,

among many others, to unthink and rethink Eurocentrism (Childs and Williams, 1997; Dirlik, 1994; Stam and Shohat, 2012). In a nutshell, postcolonial theory displaces the center and periphery with the very goal of rattling hegemonic power structures. This is precisely aligned with what I aim to achieve through this research: a) understand and analyze the colonial discourse that influences our experiences as international hijabi Muslim women; b) challenge these metanarratives with our personal stories; and c) center our voices as international hijabi Muslim women, despite our historical marginalization.

One such structure that has been authored and authorized through a Eurocentric frame of reference is the notion of nationality and how people make sense of their identity in national terms. The next ideology that has continuously been defined and ostracized in Eurocentric terms is Islam as a religion, particularly how it relates to the west and where it stands in the Anglo-European conceptualization of the world. In the following sections I discuss these two matters in isolation. Then I move forward to understand how the intersection of nationality (Middle-Eastern identities), religion (Islam), and gender (female) play out in global power dynamics.

The Questions of Nationality, National Identity, and Nation States

The notion of nationality is a multilayered and complex historical construct. As each layer is peeled back, philosophical, political, and sociocultural questions emerge. These complications occur in the conceptualization of nationality and its underpinning ideologies as well. Nations and nationality are such integral components of our modern lives that it is close to impossible to imagine a world without national borders, nationalistic ideals, and some form of national identification (Duara, 1996; Smith, 1996). Nation-states are often the primary source of people's loyalties and who they identify with or disassociate from; on a more extreme level, it is the

foundation where enemies are conceptualized (Duara, 1996). I would like to highlight the word modern, as there is ongoing debate in terms of what a nation is, who is considered a national, and when and how nations were conceptualized. As for the roots of nations as a form of categorization, there is ongoing debate among scholars about whether nations are a modern phenomenon or have existed since antiquity. On the one hand, some conceptualize nations as a group of people who come together based on common features, establish common interests, and work together toward a common goal. In this sense, nations can be considered an ancient concept. According to this definition, civilizations such as the Persian, Roman, or Ottoman empires can be considered nations.

On the other hand, modernists believe that nations and nation states are a modern phenomenon and a legacy of the European Enlightenment. They argue that ancient civilizations cannot be categorized as nation states because they lacked some of the basic components of what it means to be a nation. According to Smith (1996), “a nation is a named community of history and culture, possessing unified territory, economy, mass education system and common legal rights” (p. 107). Based on this definition, many of the original settlements and ancient civilizations do not qualify as nations since they did not have central economic, educational, and legal systems. Nation states are the invention of the modern era, when cultural, religious, or social affiliations were replaced with political membership (e.g., citizenship is the basis for membership in modern communities). What makes nation-states a modern phenomenon is not the notion of group identification or national consciousness, but rather the systems which have been put into place to regulate people on a national level and countries on an international level (Duara, 1996).

Nation states were formed in the ruins of the empires that collapsed by the end of nineteenth century (Eley & Suny, 1996). This is a rough estimation of when and how nation states came into the public consciousness. In reality, the culmination of many historical events resulted in the

formation of a political entity known as the sovereign state. The conception of nation states go hand in hand with the formation of what was considered a civil society. This civil society represented many of the European ideals of progress and modernity that are linked to secular individualistic freedom and technological advancement (Cohn & Dirks, 1988; Bhambra, 2015). Related to these ideals is the industrialization of modern societies, the growth of capitalism, and the establishment national and international commerce. Nation-states were created as a means to meet the demands of modern societies and represent progress as was understood in Eurocentric terms (Balibar, 1996; Chatterjee, 1986; Smith, 1996). Despite the appealing packaging of liberty, democracy, and sovereignty for all as the underpinning ideology of nation states, in reality most nation states claimed their legitimacy through violence, war, and totalitarianism (Eley & Suny, 1996).

Even though it is impossible to pinpoint a precise historical moment that resulted in the formation of nation states, we can delve deeper into this conception by attempting to understand the ideological, socioeconomic, and historical realities that culminated in the unit called a nation. As previously mentioned, the age of the empire was over by the end of the nineteenth century. Nonetheless, the percolating ideology of civilizing the east or the barbaric ‘other’ did not end with the empire; neither did the empire’s desire to exploit the resources and control its ex-colonies. Hence, a new era began based on the same ideologies but with new strategies. Not only were nation states formed as a reaction to the dismantlement of European empires, but their very ideological foundations were rooted in the European Enlightenment and Eurocentric in nature (Calhoun, 1997). First and foremost, the bureaucratization of people’s communal living can be viewed as a subdivision of the civilizing mission and a means for control. Historically, groups of people had been living in communities, exchanging goods, and forming relations. These relations, however,

were not nationalistic. The nationalistic undertone was formed based on the European ideal of individualistic subjectivity within a bureaucratic frame of reference (Bhambra, 2015; Duara, 1996).

The discourse of nationalistic pride and self-determination emerged as the multinational states of the nineteenth century fell apart (Renan, 1996). Hence, they needed to acquire new language that not only explained their newly established states and attach an identity to it, but also to continue their imperial rule in a new form (Said, 1994). Hence, nation-states became the language to construct and sustain a new form of hegemony (Cohn & Dirks, 1988). This was done through a variety of methods. Foucault (1977) viewed the notion of dividing space into units as an apparatus that states utilized for discipline and control. He argued that this spatialization into units created hierarchies which then became the basis for how units related to one another. Under these conditions, the state or the master became the regulatory force to maintain and control the interactions and exchanges between these units. Although Foucault's (1977) argument about dividing people and places into spatial units mainly refers to individual societies, the philosophical conceptualization can apply to the larger global landscape and its division into units known as nations.

Further, this territorialization of the world into units is exclusive in nature and contributes to the 'us' vs. 'them' mentality. The ideological structure of being nationals or citizen of a state becomes the basis through which people communicate. A symbolic difference exists, then, where some are of 'ourselves' and others become 'foreigners' (Balibar, 1996; Chatterjee, 1986). This oppositional mentality functioned on multiple levels once nation states were formed. On the national level, it often resulted in a feverish insistence on a homogenous common culture which tended to marginalize many groups of people along the way (Calhoun, 1997). Often, nationalistic

discourse emphasized assimilating into the dominant mainstream culture and viewed minority groups that did not conform as an internal 'other' (Duara, 1996). As a result, certain cultures or ways of being were seen as less or not patriotic enough since they did not fit the dominant description of being a nationalist, even within national borders. Who defines what it means to be a national of a certain country? Who chooses what ways of being are the accepted norms within these boundaries? The group that gets to set the norms, create the rubrics, and decide what fits the nationalist rubric is the elite and ruling class of that society. It follows that minority groups, women, and the lower class are marginalized and 'othered' (McClintock, 1997). A similar process happens on an international level. Certain countries and cultures are forced to reject their ancestral values and traditions that are seen as an obstacle to the process of progress (Chatterjee, 1986).

As previously mentioned, the very formation of nation states with sovereignty has historically been entrenched with war, violence, and bloodshed against those categorized as the enemy. This is particularly true about colonized countries and their struggle to gain independence from their colonizers. However, once independent, the same sovereign states strive to become their colonizers. This occurs for two reasons. First, Fanon (1963) argued that independence from colonizers is a mere illusion. After the departure of the colonizers, the people who assume power are the bourgeoisie, who have been well trained in the ways of the master. These are the people who are best equipped to replicate the practices of the colonizers as closely as possible. Further, as the colonizers leave, they leave behind the structures they established for regulating the public. These same structures will continue to regulate the lives of people from ex-colonies long after their independence.

Second, as Chatterjee (1986) contended, these established norms and routines were based on European notions about man, morals, and society which were alien to many eastern countries.

These norms were established as universal standards and a sense of hierarchy was created: the countries that met the standards and those who aspired to meet them. A sense of shortcoming and deficiency was woven into the historical attempt to imagine a national culture for many countries, mainly those that were categorized as developing. The question of nationality is particularly important in this research. As previously mentioned, at the heart of national identification lies the formation of an 'other' that is not one of 'us,' or, in the extreme case, is our enemy. In this conceptualization, western nations are positioned as first and more developed, while the so-called orient becomes third and aspiring to develop, forever not quite there yet. Furthermore, the cultural practices of these countries are positioned as despotic, exotic, and inferior. Consequently, the citizens of these countries are viewed through this essentialistic lens of backwardness. Most importantly, when speaking of countries in the Middle-East, the matter is intricately connected to the notion of Islam and its complex historical relationship with the west.

The Question of Islam

It is under these global historical, sociocultural, and political circumstances that Islam is conceived and constructed. When dealing with the matter of Islam amidst global relations, rarely do we see it viewed and analyzed as an ideology. This is where historicity, politics, and geographical location come into play (Goulet, 2011).

Islam has always been an integral component of western discourse, not necessarily due to its ideological foundations or even the great number of its followers. One of the most important reasons (if not the most important reason) for the presence of Islam in western discourse is its particular locale in the world. Islam as a religion is mainly practiced in the Middle-East, to the degree that Islam and the Middle-East have become synonymous. Despite great religious diversity

in the region, other religions are rarely emphasized. Although many Muslims live throughout the world (Li, 2002), they are often ignored or talked about as an exception, alien, or anomaly to the actual culture of that place. The significance of this matter is due to the historical relation that since the eighteenth century, Europe and the US have established with the Middle-East, or the orient, as Said (1979) called it. Although the US and Europe have different relations with the orient, which has shifted and evolved with time. Nonetheless, the orient holds a special place in western experience and consciousness. The orient plays an important role in how the west defines itself. Not only does the orient contain Europe's oldest and most significant colonies, but it is also the constant 'other' that the west defines its own identity against (Said, 1979). As Hurd (2002) argued, there is a pervasive divide and opposition between the west and the Islamic world. She continued to explain that the modern western identity depends on creating an alien 'other' who is despotic, backward, and fundamentalist. Islam has been forced to assume this role.

Why is so much effort given to creating this monstrous 'other?' For King (1999), this discursive 'othering' is directly and intimately connected to the larger power relations prevalent in the world. His argument is that culture and religion are the means that hegemony and domination operate through. This is in line with Said's (1994) claim that after colonialism in its physical sense was over, its imperial ideologies continued to remain and conspire in the attitudes of the colonists. As a result, Islam was continuously positioned and explained in terms of its difference from modern and liberal Europeanness. More than what Islam actually was, the constant insistence was on what it was not (Cobb, 2007; Hurd, 2002; Koshul, 2007).

This discursive construction of Islam, Muslims, and Middle-Easterners as an evil 'other' operated on various levels. At one level, the appropriations of Islam contributed to solidifying a sense of nationness and Christianity in many western countries (Hurd, 2002). In creating a sense

of apathy, it also justified and even created a moral obligation for the civilized west to rescue the backward orientals from this despotic rule (Gandhi, 1998; Said, 1979). Overall, it provided the west with a sense of solidarity, a firm belief in their superiority, and a reason for physical and epistemic violence against Islam, Muslims, the Middle-East, and all of the backward ‘others.’

The first layer that this epistemic violence occurs on is in the realm of knowledge construction. I refer to Foucault’s question of who gets to define concepts, their scope, and how they can or cannot be utilized. King (1999) provided a great example of how the power of knowledge has affected the realm of religion. According to King (1999), the post-Enlightenment constructions of the dichotomy between the public vs. private and religion vs. mysticism were placed in the private sphere. While science was considered a public matter with quantifiable, measurable, and replicable results, religion and mysticism (often used interchangeably) were considered private matters. Oftentimes apoliticized and ahistoricized religion was denied its communal component and its scope was limited to personal belief. Several Eurocentric notions can be witnessed in this construction; first, science and religion were placed on the opposing sides of a dichotomous spectrum. Second, religion and power were divorced from one another, ignoring the historical entanglement of religion, culture, and power on both local and global levels. Last, there was an underlying implication that science was superior to religion. Consequently, the modern, science-driven societies of the west were superior to the mystical countries of the east. In turn, the mystical east was seen as too emotional and too feminine in contrast to the masculine, rational, and intellectual west (Cobb, 2007; King, 1999; Koshul, 2007; Said, 1979). Ironically, despite Europe’s shifts in relation to the concepts of religion as a whole, Judaism, and Christianity in particular, amidst all the ups and downs, Islam continued to remain the constant ‘other.’ Prior to the eighteenth century, Islam, despite its shared theological roots with Christianity, was

considered the polar opposite of Christian Europe. After the eighteenth century's rise of scientific reasoning in line with Enlightenment values, Islam continued to be the 'other.'

As scientific reasoning, modernity, and secularization became the prominent discourse in the west, the Islamic world also took an antagonistic approach toward the west. However, as Mutman (1993) argued, this retaliatory attempt by the Islamic world to position modernity as a false and fake historical narrative did not play the same role as the orientalist discourse on Islam and Muslims for two reasons. First, the attempt to dismantle the hegemonic orientalist discourse still functioned within frameworks of representation, frameworks that had long been established and understood as the norm. Second, ideas do not exist outside configurations of power. Hence, despite their efforts to speak up, certain voices were heard louder and clearer. As Li (2002) contended, westernization has taken over every aspect of modern life, from the economy to education, culture, and political systems. It is in this context that it is close to impossible for alternate ways of thinking or being to be recognized, let alone accepted. Western ideologies continue to colonize the minds and lives of people across the globe, against which any ideology seems insufficient, if not backward.

The Majority World, Muslim Woman Amidst All This

The majority world, in this case Middle-Eastern women's positionality is a particularly interesting one. On a national level, women are placed at the center of nationalist discourse of independence, anticolonial resistance, and liberation. Once independent and free, the newly-found nation falls back on its old patriarchal regimes of thoughts through a self-adopted amnesia of the past struggles and promises (McClintock, 1997; Zayzafoon, 2005). On an international level, the

oppressed brown woman awaits the white man to rescue her from the brown man. Hence, she becomes central to the imperialist colonizing mission (Pui-lan, 2002).

“It is as if everywhere we go, we become someone’s private zoo” (Minh-ha, 1989, p.82). Minh-ha (1989) used this phrase to explain how minority women—so-called third-world women, in particular—feel when they are asked to talk about their experiences in feminist circles. This statement sums up many of the challenges that non-white, non-western women face in their attempt to explain their lived experiences in relation to larger patriarchal systems of oppression. It brings up issues of tokenization, representation, stereotyping, and voice. Who gets to say what to whom? Where does this controversy come from? Aren’t all women in this together, after all? Not if some women are not woman enough!

Just as many other Eurocentric ways of being or ways of knowing have come to be considered as The Way, there is a tendency in feminist discourse to explain the white western woman’s experience as universal, where a communal claim to sisterhood is professed (Sandoval, 2003). However, in the process it ignores the fact that gender is experienced differently around markers of race, ethnicity, class, nationality, and sexuality (Ang, 2003; Mohanty, 1988). Before any further discussion of the intersections of gender with different markers of identity, I would like to use Ang’s (2003) words to clarify what I mean by whiteness and western as historical constructs:

White/western hegemony is not a random psychological aberration but the systemic consequence of a global historical development over the past 500 years—the expansion of European capitalist modernity throughout the world, resulting in the subsumption of all ‘other’ peoples to its economic, political and ideological logic and mode of operation. Whiteness and westernness are closely interconnected; they are two sides of the same coin.

westernness is the sign of white hegemony at the international level, where non-white, non-western nations are by definition subordinated to white, western ones. (p. 197)

This is what makes feminism as a concept hegemonic and colonial in nature (Ang, 2003; Sandoval, 2003; Minh-ha, 1989). Despite its efforts to dismantle patriarchal structures of domination, it reiterates colonial power structures by ‘othering’ minority women.

This ‘othering’ adopts different shapes, forms, and degrees. On the most fundamental level, the opportunity given to majority world women to speak their voice (and provided by white/western feminism) demonstrates a hierarchical structure where authority is granted from above. In other words, this opportunity can be taken away and the rights of majority world women to represent themselves can be revoked. The whole process is paternalistic in nature, getting at who allows whom to speak for who. Further, as majority world women attempt to propagate their voice, they find themselves entangled in predefined systems of thought established by white/western feminism. They have two options: either play the game by these rules or retreat from the game altogether. On another level, even if the native woman chooses to stay in the game, she is constantly compared to her western peers and she is never enough. This serves a double purpose. In comparison, it is a means to elevate the western woman to a liberated status and prove she is better than her eastern ‘sisters.’ Further, the native woman is stripped of her existence and subjectivity as well as degraded to an oppressed object. Majority world women then become a monolithic, singular entity that is ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domesticated, family-oriented, and positioned in contrast to their educated, modern, in control, and free to make decisions white/western peers (Ang, 2003; Dube, 2002; Pui-lan, 2002; Minh-ha, 1989; Mohanty, 1988; Zayzafoon, 2005).

It is no surprise that the majority world woman is in no place to represent herself, but rather needs to be represented! It is no surprise that Spivak (2006) believed that the “subaltern cannot speak.” Minh-ha (1989) would agree with Spivak on this matter. She offered that liberal academic feminism silences the native woman, preventing her to speak for herself. In this context, the primacy of western discourse often suppresses any alternate way of being (Zayzafoon, 2005). It also defines for the ‘other’ woman what oppression is, what liberty looks like, and how she should feel under these circumstances (Ang, 2003; Minh-ha, 1997; Mohanty, 1988; Zayzafoon, 2005). This concurs with Connell’s (2014) point that issues surrounding gender are intricately entangled with the global politics of knowledge economy.

It is within this context that Muslim women, the majority worlders in particular, become the ultimate ‘other.’ All aspects of their identity become defined and evaluated based on the standardized, patriarchal, and Eurocentric model, through which they disappear as decision making subjects and are positioned as objects in the midst of a complicated power struggle (Spivak, 2006). The position of Middle-Eastern Muslim women is particularly complicated as she becomes the embodiment of not only the backward practices of the orient but also the oppressive traditions of Islamic practices. Hence, the Muslim woman’s status becomes symbolic of the west’s efforts and its measurement of success in uprooting outdated Islamic and oriental practices and replacing them with modern, liberal ones (Yegenoglu, 2002; Zayzafoon, 2005).

The Muslim woman, her decisions, and her identity is a particularly contested terrain. On one level, she has to prove to the Anglo-European man that she is not a powerless victim in need of saving. She also finds herself in debate with the western woman that the Eurocentric ways are not a good-for-all panacea for all women (Ang, 2003; Dube, 2002; Pui-lan, 2002). To the so-called first-world women she has to explain that their experiences might or might not be similar, and in

the spirit of sisterhood she does not want to convert or become a secondhand copy of an Anglo-European woman (Cooke, 2002; Sandoval, 2003). She also needs to reiterate the fact that western standards are not necessarily universal. What might seem liberation to white women might not have the same connotation to a Muslim woman (Yegenoglu, 2002; Zayzafoon, 2005). The Muslim woman has to remind western women and men that she has been involved in historical struggles for her own rights in the way she defines it and that she has not been a passive observer of what happens to her. With confidence, she also has to point out that she is smart enough to analyze and understand global political relations and how she has been used as a tool in service of the colonial mission.

On another level, she has to struggle with fellow Muslim men. With them she is in constant conversation about the historical patriarchal construction of religion by men. That Islam, like any other religion, has been interpreted by men and for men in order to maintain patriarchal control. She further has to add that she can be liberated and a good Muslim simultaneously. That she can have her own interpretation of text and the religion which is as valid as those of men. To the fellow Muslim man, she also needs to remind that she, just like him, is aware of the colonial mentality, the imperialist agenda, and more importantly, that she can speak for herself (Cooke, 2002; Mohanty, 1988).

Conclusion

Amidst the entanglement of history, politics, ideology, and power, within a context where the world is divided into fragments and a predetermined competition in which some of these fragments became first and others became second or third, imperialism thrives. Imperialism as an ideology feeds on domination and subordination. For this to happen, for some to rule, there needs

to be a group for ruling or in need of ruling. This is where sociopolitical constructions and hierarchies come into play. Accordingly, binary oppositions, dichotomies, and ‘others’ are important to the game. This is how colonialism, imperialism, patriarchy, racism, xenophobia, and other systems of oppression play the game. Some races, genders, ideologies, and cultures become the standard and are positioned as the masters. It is for the rest to strive to be like them, become the master. Little do they know that in the framework defined by the master, they have no chance of winning. The majority world woman has always been positioned at the periphery, as less than or not enough, whether it is her gender, culture, nationality, or belief. She has never been the center.

Hence, all of the above make matters related to majority world women of the utmost importance to postcolonial theory. Not only because of the imperial nature of feminism and its implications for the civilizing mission (Gandhi, 1998), but also based on postcolonial theory’s investment in disrupting hierarchies of race, class, gender, and culture as well as resisting authoritative regimes of thought (Said, 1994). Postcolonial theory assumes the responsibility to position at the center those who have been historically marginalized. It is about time to hear the voices of majority world Muslim women from the center through a postcolonial lens. This is an attempt to deal with people’s realities rather than an overused metaphor with no significant meaning or orientation (Tuck & Yang, 2012). In dealing with this reality, my research aims to center the voices and narratives of Muslim women to create the change they want to see in their environment.

I accordingly explored the experiences of international hijabi Muslim women studying in US institutions of higher education through their own narratives; first, to understand how these experiences are shaped by their identity markers of gender, religion, and nationality. Second, I explored how each of these markers, separately or in relation to one another, position her as the

alien 'other' and contribute to silencing her voice. Further, we engaged in a critical discussion on how she makes sense of the historical and sociocultural interplay of power and politics and how they have resulted in the hegemonic 'othering' of certain groups of people. Lastly, we talked about how she reclaims and maintains her voice under these circumstances.

CHAPTER 4. NARRATIVE INQUIRY

Introduction

In this chapter, I explain my choice of narrative inquiry as the method of research for this study. I begin by elaborating on the power and value of stories and their contribution to understanding individual and collective experiences. In discussing the potential of stories, I focus on the role they play in knowledge transfer and cultural understanding. Then, I explain my choice of narrative inquiry as the methodology of this research. To do so, I elaborate on its onto-epistemological stance, its defining features, and why it is a viable method for my research. I discuss its post-colonial stance, the potential to provide a holistic account of experience, and how this relates to time, place, and history. I expand on these features and how these components relate to my work, the people I work with, and the theoretical lens of my research. Furthermore, I describe my journey throughout this research and the realities of conducting a narrative inquiry study. I also provide in-depth descriptions of the women I worked with, our collaboration as fellow researchers, and the study's context. I discuss how I engaged with our stories, which I present in the subsequent chapters.

Why Stories?

In chapter one, I explained my journey of navigating a puzzle that lays the foundation for the conceptualization of this study. However, I did not provide an in-depth reasoning for selecting narratives and stories as the foundation of my work. I chose to engage with my fellow researchers through the exchange of stories because as humans, we are storied beings. We live in and work

with and through stories. Stories are a means for us to make sense of our lives (Bruner, 1990, 2004; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Frank, 2010). We not only work with stories on a personal level, but we also relate to and communicate with one another through stories (Huber, Caine, Huber, & Steeves, 2013). Moreover, stories are the primary method through which humans transfer knowledge (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Hendry (2010) explains that ancient Greeks used stories to address questions of meaning and knowing; not only in the poetic realm, but also in scientific matters. Stories are a catalyst for human beings to understand their own and others' experiential knowledge in relation rather than in isolation (Clandinin, 2013).

Historically, people have used stories to communicate with and relate to one another, as well as walk through life as a collective (Bowman, 2006; Huber, Caine, Huber, & Steeves, 2013). They have built communities around common stories, factual or fictional. These stories became a bonding thread that related groups of people together. The sharing of these narratives provided them with language, knowledge, and wisdom to make meaning of their environment, individually as well as collectively (Bowman, 2006). Accordingly, stories have individual, group, and societal implications. These implications are two-fold: first, what we learn and take from the stories passed down to us; second, why and how we choose to share certain stories. We decide to accept or reject stories, or some aspect of them, through which we create new stories. As these stories intersect, they shift and change. This cycle of hearing, accepting, rejecting, creating, telling, and retelling continues as we walk through life. While working through my own narrative of life in the United States, I arrived at a larger puzzlement (Clandinin, 2013). Is it just me? What about all the other international, hijabi Muslim females studying within this context? Do they go through similar experiences? If so, do they have the disposition to make sense of it? Do they ever come across the opportunity to recount them?

In this capacity, our interaction with stories comes with responsibility. Our obligation to the stories we interact with comes in two forms: to remember and to recount. This recognition carries learning from the past and of the past. It also provides hope and aspiration for the future by imagining the world in a different light. In this capacity, stories transcend their particular time, place, and culture to provide insight into how human beings have lived, live now, and will continue to live on this planet. Moreover, despite the transcendental and eternal nature of stories, they are deeply rooted in the milieu of their narration. Stories are contextual in the sense that they relate to the previous and future stories of their setting. Hence, they are deeply embedded within a cultural context. Once stories are narrated, they take an identity of their own and adopt the capacity to resonate with people differently. As stories are narrated, they influence the audience, the narrator, and the narrated. As stories affect human consciousness (Frank, 2010), they touch the past, present, and future.

Consequently, stories hold tremendous potential for teaching and learning (Huber, Caine, Huber, & Steeves, 2013). The narration and re-narration of stories allows for more enriched and meaningful stories to form. This opens space for the transformation of lived experiences on micro- and macro-levels. As deeper meaning and wisdom is attained, stories also create movement in and mobilizes groups of people, through which new possibilities transpire (Clandinin, 2013; Frank, 2010). This is the commitment I made regarding my personal puzzlement. Beyond my limited academic role as a researcher, I view myself as a narrator and story teller. This is my responsibility to this study and to my fellow researchers. My hope is that our narrations become a bridge to understanding, compassion, and empathy. In a context where most political debate revolves around bans, deportation, and building walls, narrating these stories is a commitment to our shared human existence.

The promise of these stories is multilayered: first, they hold promise for us as researchers/narrators; second, they offer hope for the Muslim community in terms of what they deem important to be heard; third, they provide an opportunity for social change via the new societal insight they provide. These layers became the underlying rationale for my narrative inquiry methodology. First, I commit to walk through some of my questions and utilize the stories I tell myself and others as a guiding mechanism through a world dense with confusion (Frank, 2010). Second, I recount the stories of other hijabi Muslim women as a commitment to my current social setting. I believe our stories have the potential to expand the horizons of human understanding and open space for new possibilities (Thomas, 2012).

Why Narrative Inquiry?

Bruner (1990) views methods such as narrative inquiry as a struggle to make sense of human experience in more meaningful ways than what positivistic methods have to offer. The basic premise of narrative inquiry is that people live life through stories and the telling and retelling of those stories. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) conceptualize narrative inquiry as both the phenomenon under study and the method adopted for studying it. In other words, “narrative inquiry” is also “inquiry into narrative.” To clarify this distinction, they opt to call the phenomenon “story” and the inquiry “narrative”: “...narrative inquiry is a way of understanding and inquiring into experience. It is nothing more and nothing less. Narrative inquiry is situated in relationships and community, and it attends to notions of expertise and knowing in relational and participatory ways” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 13).

While Clandinin (2013) attempts to distinguish between narrative and stories in a way that appeals to an academic audience colonized by positivistic thinking, I make a conscious choice to

remain faithful to my de-colonial epistemological stance. I use the terms story and narrative interchangeably. Polkinghorne (1995) explains that the term narrative has been adopted by many narrative inquirers to represent the work they do (as opposed to the word story) because stories have come to be synonymous with fiction and imply a sense of falsehood. In dealing with stories, these predominant questions remain: is this story true or not? Is it a work of fiction or a journalistic report? Nonetheless, these questions are irrelevant based on the epistemological stance of stories. Stories do not aim to tell the ‘Truth’ or a ‘Truth’. Rather, their purpose is to provide a context in which to live, think, and breathe alongside complicated truths (Frank, 2010). Clandinin and Murphy (2009) also posit that, in narrative inquiry, representing a reality in its truest shape or form is not the set ideal. What narrative inquiry instead aspires to do is create new relationships amongst human beings and their environments. In a nutshell, “we say that people by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives, whereas narrative researchers describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experience.” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990, p. 2)

Narrative Inquiry’s Postcolonial Stance

To further understand narrative inquiry, we need to unpack its positionality. According to Clandinin (2013), it is both a methodology and an epistemological stance. It relates to the question of how and what we view as science, how we make sense of ourselves and our lives as human beings, and how we approach our embeddedness within a sociocultural context. The answer to these questions—in addition to the belief that we understand phenomena in narrative terms—gave birth to narrative inquiry as a methodology. To begin with, narrative inquiry has postmodern and constructionist characteristics. Its postmodern tendency stems from its skepticism toward and critique of the rigid nature of the scientific method. The academic shift toward narrative disrupted some of the basic premises of scientific knowing. For example, dealing with stories as data sources

challenged the established understanding of participants as rigid and fixed through time and place. It also rejected the notion of a universal Truth and privileged a more contextual understanding of matters and phenomena. According to Bowman (2006), the narrative turn is a stance against the meta-narratives and grand theories that have come to dominate our understanding of research and knowing. The alternative, what Bowman (2006) calls “little stories,” are situated, contextual, concrete, and based on real, everyday occurrences. Bowman (2006) argues that these “little stories” offer a counter discourse against the hegemonic T ‘Truth’ established by dominant ideologies.

Hence, narrative inquiry can also be considered a postcolonial methodology. It is a decolonizing methodology in two ways: first, it disrupts the dominant discourse of what is considered scientific knowing by challenging the established notions of validity and reliability in the academic realm. Second, as Hamdan (2009) states, narrative inquiry can be viewed as a decolonizing methodology based on the counter narrative it provides to the monolithic, hegemonic one propagated by systemic narratives of subjugation. Hamdan (2009) explains how the predominant discourse on Muslim and Middle-Eastern women is monolithic and rooted in orientalist thought. According to this representation, Muslim women are considered passive, oppressed objects with little agency. This portrayal has become the lens through which Western rhetoric views and represents Muslim women. In this climate, offering a narrative that challenges the dominant discourse not only disrupts these hegemonic discursive practices, but also provides an insightful, realistic account of such experiences. What is key to understanding narrative research is that it does not aim to attain the ‘Truth’ or represent facts; in fact, it does not even aspire to find the answers. Rather than being concerned with finding answers, narrative inquiry strives to ask new questions in order to create new possibilities (Clandinin, 2013; Thomas, 2012) within, as

Bruner (2001) calls it, an “epistemology of ambiguity.” Narrative inquiry shifts the emphasis from causation to meaning making (Hammack, 2011) and attempts to understand how people make sense of their lived experiences through the narratives they tell (Bruner, 2001).

Why Narrative Inquiry and Postcolonial Theory?

I ascribe to Hammack’s (2011) notion that engaging in such narratives provides an opportunity for voices that have historically been silenced or underrepresented to be heard and transform the systemic structures of oppression via representation. He believes transformation occurs on two levels: the individual and societal. On an individual level, change happens as a result of self-understanding and personal reflection. Social change, on the other hand, occurs by challenging the dominant narrative that reproduces injustice. “This *master narrative* represents a collective storyline which group members perceive as compulsory—a story which is so central to the group’s existence and “essence” that it commands identification and integration into the personal narrative.” (Hammack, 2011, p. 313) Master narratives shape how gender, class, race, nationality, ethnicity, and religion are conceived and perceived by different societies. Individual narratives are discursively constructed by their corresponding master narratives. It is worth noting that neither personal nor grand narratives are fixed and static entities; rather, they are continuously developing, shifting, and changing. Bowman (2006) explains that both grand narratives and small narratives are inherently valuable so long as we understand their position as stories and *storied*. Culture seeps into the individual and the individual into culture. Neither can be understood as an incontestable reality. Bowman (2006) sees a dialectic responsibility between grand and small narratives as they interact with and refine one another.

Moreover, Bruner (1990) explains that as human beings come together, they form a sense of canonical understanding of the world around them that they deem ‘normal’. Any matter outside

the boundaries of this norm is rejected based on its abnormality. It is under such circumstances that narrative serves as a mediator of negotiation rather than confrontation. It provides a venue to dialogue the dominant interpretations held by a society and redefines them as necessary. Furthermore, an integral component of post-colonial theory is challenging the established Eurocentric norms and modes of thinking propagated by a history of colonization (Gandhi, 1998). As previously mentioned, narrative work is post-colonial in nature as it disrupts the common societal conceptions. In the case of the Muslim population, the story the US population is constantly exposed to revolves around terrorism, war, barbarism, and the oppression of women (Cesari, 2004; Ewing, 2008). Most of the US population has heard the term *jihad*, a technical term of Islamic jurisprudence; however, very few know the basic tenets of Islam, what Muslims believe, or where they pray. This lack of knowledge often positions Muslims as aliens from outer space. Despite the hyperbolic undertone of this statement, it is not a farfetched claim based on some of the questions I have been asked in the college town where I live. I am asked such questions on a regular basis from a multitude of people: students, staff, colleagues, and community members. Examples include:

- How do Muslims reproduce? (*Are there any other ways I am not aware of?*)
- Do you sleep with this on? (*Referring to my hijab*)
- *Who do you play volleyball with? Your brothers?* (This question was asked following the great surprise that I play volleyball. Did this person assume that I have eleven brothers to play volleyball with?)
- Can you (as a Muslim woman) go to school? (*Is there any other route to a Ph.D. degree?*
I had just explained I was doing my doctorate in Education.)

The fact that Muslims engaging in sexual intercourse, playing sports, and going to school is such shocking news to some contributes to the urgency for our stories to be heard and narrated.

Narrative's postcolonial characteristics support this research in a variety of ways. First, it serves as a platform for the stories of Muslim women to be heard and an account of the ways in which societal discourse and culture impact how these women interact with their context. These stories also provide an alternative perspective on what it means to be a Muslim woman in the current Islamophobic global environment. These "little stories" are positioned in dialogue with grand Islamophobic discourse in order to clarify, explain, and provide further insight into the experiences of these women (Bowman, 2006). The intent of this methodology is to disrupt the historical colonial construction of Muslim women as monolithic (Hamdan, 2009). Moreover, my theoretical framework is aligned with the postcolonial lens. Postcolonial theory not only attempts to challenge the dominant perception about what research is and how it should be done, but also confronts established societal norms and values. I examine the role that common US norms and values play in the lived experiences of Muslim women who study in higher-education settings. I showcase the narratives of Muslim women to the center, in order to challenge the hegemonic grand narratives that define Muslim women.

Where Are We?

Stories and experiences are intricately connected, and narrative inquiry's primary purpose is to present a holistic picture of human lived experiences. It aims to preserve the wholeness of an account rather than dissecting it into fragments (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Narrative descriptions take a holistic approach to human existence in the sense that human experience and action is seen as situated within a certain context. They also bring

together a variety of events, happenings, and experiences to create a temporal whole (Polkinghorne, 1995). As it is impossible to narrate the entirety of a human's life in all its components, complexities, relations, and events, narrative inquiry focuses on understanding and narrating part of this story. Narrative inquiry attends to the temporal aspect of a person's experience to gain a more holistic understanding (Clandinin, 2013). In this study, I used a variety of methods to create a narrative of our experiences as international hijabi Muslim women. In addition to engaging in our personal narratives, we also positioned them in dialogue with the narratives of our context and how these metanarratives affect our experiences (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). In this case, how larger sociopolitical discourse of Islamophobia and prejudice against Muslims affects our lived experiences as hijabi Muslim women.

What I intend to do is surpass the surface level of our stories and delve deep into what our experiences entailed. To do so, I adopted a three-dimensional analysis: temporality along one axis, interaction between the personal and social along another, and place on the third axis (Clandinin, 2013). In this model, narratives are considered holistic in the sense that they are not fragmented, disconnected pieces of events, actions, or experiences. They are temporal in the ways in which they provide insight into human experience of a certain time and place. Further, narratives situate human experience within a certain context to demonstrate how it interconnects with place, sociopolitical rhetoric, past events, and the aspirations of their particular locale (Polkinghorne, 1995). Moreover, this study moves beyond individual experiences to understand the social, historical, and political discourses that inform our experiences. It focuses on more than the personal as it positions personal narratives within larger sociopolitical and cultural discourse to understand how and why these narratives are constructed and enacted (Clandinin, 2013). In summary, this study challenges predominant sociopolitical rhetoric.

Grand Sociopolitical Discourse

In terms of historical period, I am positioning my research in a time of heightened anti-Islamic sentiment during which the rise and fall of ISIS, the conflict in Syria, and sporadic terrorist attacks in the name of Islam have increased fear of and hatred toward the Muslim community. However, this skepticism toward Muslims is not merely limited to current global events. Past incidents, for example the 9/11 attacks, have also influenced the lived experiences of both Muslim and non-Muslim communities. Such global terrorist attacks have resulted in a sense of anxiety in local communities, particularly those with limited knowledge about Islam and Muslims. This is not to mention the deep histories of colonialism and imperialism that inform a distrustful mutual relationship (Ibrahim, 2007; Said, 1979). As global and local events interact, they leave the Muslim community in a vulnerable position. For example, while I was writing this chapter, an assault occurred in an Arizona mosque. Two mothers took their children to the mosque, stole items from the mosque, made hateful remarks, and broadcasted the whole event live on Facebook (Sidner & Simon, 2018). In addition to their deep Islamophobic attitudes, what makes this incident increasingly disturbing is that they were intentionally teaching this attitude and behavior to their children. Moreover, they conducted this hateful act with such pride that they broadcasted it live on Facebook. Considering the current US President's discourse regarding the Muslim community, such behavior is to be expected. Given this context of increasing anti-Muslim rhetoric, attitudes, and behaviors, it is vital for Muslim stories like ours to be heard.

In addition to the biased stigmatization of the Muslim population, such rhetoric has moved beyond words into real-world manifestations. On January 27, 2017, President Trump signed an executive order that barred people from seven Muslim majority countries from entering the US. The cited purpose of this ban was to protect the US from so-called foreign terrorists (Trump's

executive order: Who does travel ban affect?, 2017). All the countries listed in the initial travel ban – Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Yemen – were Muslim majority countries. This is why the ban was also commonly known as the Muslim ban. While this ban was initially met with some backlash from the general public and has faced various legal challenges, it continues to function and impose restrictions and burdens on people from these countries. In the current study, I was the only person from one of these so-called dangerous countries. I can only speak from my personal experience within the Iranian community. This policy has inflicted a roller coaster of emotions, including frustration, anxiety, powerlessness, isolation, and devastation. Such policies are an indication of the intricate interconnectivity of sociopolitical discourse and concrete actions. Heba, Najma, and I are navigating life as international graduate students, women, and hijabis in this complicated climate of systematic and biased othering of Muslim and Middle-Eastern identities.

Time and Place

This study took place during an interesting time in global politics. As previously mentioned, the 2016 president-elect of the United States openly antagonized the Muslim community based on common misconceptions. Furthermore, in Europe, many far-right groups gained increasing popularity, which gave rise to white supremacist, anti-immigration, and anti-Muslim sentiments (Europe's Rising Far Right: A Guide to the Most Prominent Parties, 2016). The narratives of this study form amidst this ever-shifting, entangled web of relations—a web of intertwined connections between the individual, time, environment, personal, social, sociopolitics, and communal, all of which are in the continuous process of making (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Within this process, I acknowledge the ever-shifting nature of our individual narratives and the grand narratives of our time. Ontoepistemologically, this work is a continuous phenomenon,

always in the process of making and embedded in relationality. This study is relational in the sense that our connections play a role in which stories are narrated and how (Clandinin, 2013).

Another connection that takes shape as we walk through life is the mutually influential relationship we form with the place where we live. As for us, we live in a place known to be the heart of America, in one of the Midwestern states known to be predominantly Christian and conservative. To provide a general sense of where we live, both the state and county were red in the 2016 US presidential election (2016 Indiana Presidential Election Results, 2016). However, the university we attend as graduate students, although known as a conservative institution, is famous for its large international student body. According to the Open Door Report published by the Institute of International Education, during the 2016/17 academic year, the institution ranked fourth among US public universities in terms of its number of international students (Open Door Report, 2017). The international climate of the university has influenced its immediate community. This trend has also served as a strong support system for us international students.

Although our institution as a whole is home to many students, there is a disparity in the number of international students hosted by various colleges and departments. For example, in the College of Education, only 9% of students are international. During my discussions with Heba and Najma, we agreed that the representation or underrepresentation of international students in the school as well as our respective departments played a role in how we navigated our lives as Muslim women. It is within our shared context of a US university located in a predominantly Christian, conservative region that I co-explored stories with Heba and Najma. I gained insight into how our narratives interconnected with one another as well as with the larger narratives of our time and place. It is amid this complex, entangled, and ever-shifting web of stories—what narrative

inquirers call *the field*—that I formed relationships with my co-researchers to walk alongside them and narrate our stories (Clandinin, 2013).

Who Are We?

Common Characteristics

To answer this question, I will begin by explaining who we are not. Despite the common stereotypes of Muslim women, we are not oppressed objects who lack agency. We are not blind followers of backward practices. We are not uneducated women with limited to no access to education. And we are definitely not dangerous. This is not to say that these characteristics are representative of all Muslim women. Similar to any other community, there are women who face domestic abuse or mistreatment within their family or community. What is important to understand is that like any other culture, Muslim women are diverse in their lifestyle and the challenges they grapple with. In the face any form of oppression, they also deserve support and compassion, whether it is professional support, empathy from their immediate community, and/or help from the non-Muslim community. However, the assumption that all Muslim women are oppressed and in need of saving is a simplistic caricature historically constructed by orientalist rhetoric and imperial sociopolitical discourse. Despite my emphatic rejection of the homogenization of the Muslim community and Muslim women, in this case I speak of us as a group. Although we have many personal differences, including our religious affiliations, we have the following characteristics in common. Before I speak of these shared attributes, I must explain my cultural struggle with this. In Middle-Eastern cultures, and I speak of Iran in particular, humility is considered one of the greatest virtues. The cultural heritage passed down to us from generation to generation, emphasizes the downplay of your accomplishments as a display of humility. We have

a Persian saying that translates as: “the more fruitful a tree is, the closer to the ground its branches are.” The underlying meaning of this saying is that the more accomplished you are, the more down to earth you become. In explaining all this, I would like to say that in speaking of the shared attributes of my co-researchers, I intentionally exclude myself from the group description that follows because it presents great discomfort for me to highlight my positive attributes.

I will recount a few of the many common characteristics of my co-researchers. Most prominent of these features are their intelligence, strength, determination, resilience, and compassion. Some of these characteristics do not require much explanation. For example, these are women who are completing graduate degrees at a top-ranked university. They went to the best schools in their respective countries and some earned competitive scholarships. They left their families and support networks and moved to a new country for its educational opportunities. Additionally, they are overcoming the challenges of graduate life in a second language. This process alone is evidence of great intelligence, determination, resilience, and strength. This description does not account for the struggles and challenges unique to each woman. While all five women (In the “Introducing Hijabi Heba and Niqabi Najma” section, I explain how these five women became Heba and Najma) I worked with were married, three lived in different states from their husbands. Their husbands followed them to the US and were accepted to different universities; therefore, they lived separate from one another. Two of these three women have children who they care for on their own. One of these women experienced two miscarriages on her own. Another spoke of her initial entry to the US and how she did not speak a word of English. She first had to learn English and then she applied for graduate school. These are just a few of the challenges they have encountered.

Despite their success in overcoming various challenges, all the women agreed that they were targets of stereotypes that were far from the realities of their lives. While some were more adamant about the unfairness of such propagated images of Muslim women, others were more forgiving. Some believed that it is the responsibility of the public to be more critical of what they see in the media. Others thought that we have all fallen prey to the biased information we are exposed to in one way or another. Although some were more lenient in their attitude toward the misinformation and misrepresentations dominating the public consciousness, they were all understanding and compassionate toward perpetrators of microaggressions. All were open to the communication of their lived experiences and Islam to the interested public. Some even felt that as part of the Muslim community, we were responsible for dismantling the prevailing misconceptions. Being a constant target of stereotypes and suspicion has the potential to push anyone toward anger and resentment; however, despite all their challenges, these women's common feeling toward ignorant people was compassion.

Individual Characteristics

While these women shared the above characteristics, they were different in almost all other aspects of their lives. They were from different countries and backgrounds, even though all these countries are in the Middle-East. They studied in different majors, ranging from engineering to social sciences. One of the women spoke English as fluent as a native speaker, in addition to her mother tongue and English, she also spoke five other languages fluently. However, one of the women spoke no English upon arrival in the US. She first attended English as a Second Language courses and later applied for graduate school. The three other women spoke English similar to all second language speakers, with some accent and the sporadic errors that occur while speaking a second language. Two of the women had been living in the US for four years. They had completed

their Master's in the US as well and were two years into their Ph.D. programs. Another two had been in the US for five years, one of which initially completed a year of ESL courses and was now working on her graduate degree. The last woman had been living in the US for two years, the first year accompanying her husband and starting her Ph.D. degree in the second year.

Although all were married, three had children. Furthermore, as explained in chapter one, Islam is divided into two main religious groups: Shias and Sunnis. In this study, I worked with women from both groups. An additional feature that was different amongst us was our form of hijabs. Hijab (in general Islamic terms) surpasses one's external appearance to include one's attitude and how one carries herself. However, the more common use of the term refers to the covering Muslim women wear over their heads. Hijab is very personal in nature and based on their belief system, personal taste, and sense of fashion. Different Muslim women have various styles. In addition to the hijab, some Muslim women also choose to cover their faces, which is called the niqab. Like the hijab, women who wear the niqab have different reasons and styles for their choice of attire. In this study, both hijabi and niqabi women collaborated with me.

In addition to ethnic background and choice of attire, these women had different relations with both the Muslim and non-Muslim communities. These relationships varied due to personal reasons as well as deeper sociopolitical and religious reasons. For example, some kept a distance from both the Muslim and non-Muslim communities due to the high volume of their work and familial commitments. Others were very active in the Muslim community but did not engage much with people outside the Muslim community. Some were mainly involved in activities held by the outside community and did not attend those held by the Muslim community because they felt alienated. There were also those who engaged in both communities.

Introducing Hijabi Heba and Niqabi Najma

In the previous description of the women I worked with in this research. I purposefully used a generalized characterization with little-to-no specific attributes. This is based on the commitment to confidentiality I made with my co-researchers. In narrating my journey through this research, I found myself in an increasingly difficult space of preserving the anonymity of the women I collaborated with. Furthermore, multiple layers of complexity called for diligence and care in representing these women. First, the sensitive nature of the topic posed a dilemma for these women's participation. Second, the international status of these women on student visas is a vulnerable space to occupy and often limits one's self-determining agency, which Marginson (2012) discusses extensively. Third, as previously mentioned, the time and context of this study was an interesting one in terms of both global and US politics. Many of these women were experiencing heightened fear of expressing their Muslim identities. Fourth, due to the limited number of hijabi and niqabi women on campus, any small detail could potentially reveal the identity of my co-researchers. Hence, the ethical dilemmas I worked through went beyond the standard IRB application. The potential reveal of their identities could pose actual threat to the women's safety. Particularly, in the small college town we lived in, any form of identification could lead to the identification of their houses or where their children went to school. With heightened anti-Muslim sentiments, in a small conservative town, based on the topic of this study, the revelation of their identities could mean actual harm to them or their families. Moreover, as international students, we occupy a vulnerable space in the US legal system. Any step within our visa renewal process or applying for a new status, our legal status in the US can be repealed. In case of denying our application, we have to leave the US immediately. Hence, as graduate students

the completion of our degrees depends on our legal stay in the US. If our status is jeopardized, we also lose all the work we have done toward completing our program.

As I struggled with these dilemmas, I looked for ways to discuss the stories of these women without posing a threat to their safety or jeopardizing their life and work in the US. My main commitment was to the women and their confidentiality. However, I also wanted to remain faithful to the holistic and contextual nature of their stories. Over the course of several meetings with my advisor Dr. JoAnn Phillion and committee member Dr. Stephanie Zywicki, we agreed that this form of general representation did not harm the integrity of the study and was my ethical obligation to my fellow researchers. Hence, Heba and Najma were born. Although I grappled with the reductionist undertone of creating composite characters, reducing them to their form of attire, I tried to discuss their backgrounds to the extent that did not breach confidentiality. In providing this background, my goal was to emphasize the diversity of Muslim women and their experiences.

I borrow this general representation of characters from Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT also utilizes “counter-stories” to disrupt the conception of white epistemologies as the norm, center, and objective. It uses the experiential knowledge of racialized populations via stories (beyond the Black-White discourse) to challenge the systemic structures of oppression and dominant ideology. It adheres to the intercentricity of racism with various forms of subordination (e.g. class, gender, etc.) as a commitment to creating a socially just society for all (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). In representing these counter-stories, CRT adopts various methods, one of which is composite stories/narratives. Within these composite stories/narratives, composite characters are created for the following reasons: a) to protect the identities of people participating in a study, particularly if there are a limited number of a population represented in a context; b) to reduce the risks associated with the identification of underrepresented populations partaking in a study; c) to

discuss the grand sociopolitical discourse that influences the experiences of a certain population via a subset of characters; d) to bring larger themes regarding these experiences together while allowing for the unique stories of the individual to be heard (Harper, 2009; Patton & Catching, 2009). These stories and characters are not imaginary or fictional. They represent the real-life experiences of actual people gathered through various research methods and juxtaposed with relevant scholarship (Harper, 2009). Furthermore, the use of composite characters allows for literary devices such as symbolism and metaphors to be used and provide a deeper insight into the experiences of marginalized populations (Patton & Catching, 2009). Within a narrative inquiry study, in fear for the safety of her participants, He (1998) created composite auto/biographic narratives to protect the safety of her participants. To protect her participants from the breach of their confidentiality and potential dangers, she went as far as fictionalizing some of their backgrounds (He, 1998). In this study I do not fictionalize the backgrounds of the women I worked with; however, I describe their backgrounds in broad descriptions to reduce the risk of identification. Adopting a similar approach, borrowing the notion of composite characters from CRT, I discuss the experiences of the women I worked with under two composite characters.

This notion of creating counter-stories via composite characters is closely tied to the epistemological stances of narrative inquiry and postcolonial theory. It also addresses the ethical concerns I constantly grappled with throughout my study. Furthermore, it allows for a creative space to represent the stories of my co-researchers in a more meaningful manner. As I previously discussed, my commitment of a general representation was constant throughout the research process. I was contemplating different methods of representation without any specific identification. However, after my first interview with Najma, who wears the niqab, I knew that her story and experiences needed to be heard separate from those of us who adhered to the hijab. Her

challenges were unique and harsher in nature. This was not to take reductionist approach to these women, reducing them to their choice of attire. It was rather to shed light on the harsh and extreme nature of the experiences of niqabi women living in the US. Moreover, the scholarship on Muslim women often focuses on the hijab. Rarely do we encounter a study that revolves around the niqab and niqabi women. Hence, I knew a separate section needed to be dedicated to the experiences of those who wear the niqab. As a result, I discuss the experiences of the women I walked alongside in this study under two symbolic characters of Heba and Najma. Heba is a symbolic character that represents the hijabi women in the study. Najma characterizes those who wear the niqab. What you need to know about Heba and Najma is that both are international graduate students at Purdue with the common characteristics I mentioned above. What distinguishes the two is that Heba is a hijabi and Najma is a niqabi.

Stepping into the Puzzlement

Messiness is an inseparable aspect of narrative inquiry's ever-shifting nature of life, stories, and the correlation between the two (Frank, 2010). Going into this research, I had read extensively about the fluidity, messiness, and open-endedness of this type of work. However, no amount of preparation could me for the reality. Every step along the way required flexibility and openness to change. In order to find fellow hijabi Muslim women to work with, I reached out to my friends in the community. Most agreed to participate in my study, some with contingencies. However, I wanted to diversify the general characteristics of those I worked with in terms of nationality, major, religious group, and race. Consequently, my Iranian friends and those who were US citizens were excluded from the pool and two women remained. I then asked them to introduce me to friends who met the study criteria. I contacted approximately fifteen other women via email. In addition

to explaining the topic and procedure of the research, my email asked them for an initial half hour meeting before agreeing to participate in my study. I wanted to connect with these women on a more personal level before we stepped into the research process. This initial meeting was mainly small talk about our lives in the US and some explanation of the study.

Of the fifteen initial emails, seven responded, three of whom apologized because of the reality of being a graduate student. I met with the other three and discussed my research and their role in the process. Two out of three agreed to collaborate with me and one rejected my offer after the initial meeting. Until this point, the research process was flowing smoothly. I had four—with myself, five—women who constituted the study. This was a reasonable number for a narrative inquiry research study. I had to be flexible about the fact that one of the women agreed to participate in individual interviews only (and opted out of the focus group discussion). Her reason was that she did not feel comfortable enough to share some of her thoughts with others in the community. I agreed to conduct the focus group questions separately with her.

After this initial agreement, I began the interview process. I conducted initial individual interviews with these four women. However, the next step posed some challenges. As I was trying to coordinate the focus group discussion, one of these women became frustrated with the scheduling process and decided to drop out of the study. As participation in any research project is voluntary, I had no choice but to thank her for the amount of time she had collaborated with me. The other incident, however, was entirely out of our control. One of these women went back to her country for a visit during winter break. She did not respond to any of my texts or emails. I then heard from a common friend that the US had denied her entry into the country due to visa issues. She remained in her home country and missed the spring semester. I contacted her via the international communication application WhatsApp and she did not provide further details beyond

the fact that she was still in her home country because of visa issues and did not wish to be a part of this study via Skype. However, she allowed her initial interview to remain a data source of the study. At this point, two of my fellow researchers had left the study and two remained.

Responding to this matter in the middle of my research seemed like a straightforward and linear process of identifying a problem and tackling it. However, in reality it was an anxiety-ridden process of self-doubt and an existential crisis. I continually asked myself the basic question: what was I doing? These emotions were accompanied by days of crying and worry for two reasons. First, in reading research projects' final artifact, the process often seems linear, straight to the point, easy, and clean. Less common is the mention of the messiness, confusion, panic, and constant adjustment of course that occurred along the way. The most honest description is that my research process required a lot of patience, perseverance, and trust.

The second reason I discuss these emotions is to emphasize the importance of mentorship. Had it not been for my dissertation advisor, Dr. Phillion, I would have been paralyzed by these emotions for days or even weeks. Her emotional support and professional advice convinced me to restart. I attended a couple of social gatherings where I expected to meet international hijabi Muslim students. In one of these gatherings, I met two women who were from the same country, department, and who were close friends. Both agreed to be part of my study. As I conducted initial interviews with them that week, I scheduled the focus group discussion for the following week. Although the next steps went more smoothly, they still required changes and modifications. For example, as I was coordinating and time and place for our focus group discussion, I learned that one of the women had moved out of town for personal reasons. She joined our discussion via Skype and I conducted her second individual interview over Skype as well. The biggest challenge this posed was the poor sound quality that affected transcription.

I conducted initial individual interviews with open-ended questions and a discussion format as the formal process of this study (see Appendix A for questions). These interviews also included discussion about our personal lives, familial backgrounds, and the journeys that brought us to the US. The interviews were conducted on campus and recorded via a voice recorder. After the initial individual interviews, I carried a focus group discussion with all the women present, one joining us via skype. The focus group discussion also included open-ended questions as prompts (see Appendix B for questions). However, it soon became a discussion about politics, our roles as women, spirituality, and much more. In my opinion, the focus group became an interesting and insightful discussion that was more open, relaxed, vulnerable, and critical than the individual interviews. The focus group discussion was also voice recorded. I believe this occurred because of the group synergy created among the women. We sat in a room behind closed doors in a room on campus, removed our hijabs, drank coffee, made jokes, and engaged in deep conversation. Part of this synergy, I believe, is due to our backgrounds as well.

As I mentioned in chapter one, as Muslim women, there seems to be an invisible bond that connects us to one another. This connection goes beyond a personal relationship. I believe it is an invisible hierarchical space that we occupy based on the larger sociopolitical discourse. Even if we do not consciously analyze this relationship, it manifests itself in the smiles and salaams we exchange as we pass one another. It occurs as we gather together in larger social settings. It is an Intangible space of solidarity and sisterhood that is formed as a response to our 'other' status. Another reason for this closeness was that we all knew one other woman in the group prior to this study, which became a foundation for finding a deeper connection to the group. The second individual interview (see Appendix C for questions) was mainly a reflection on our discussions and the questions posed during the research. The focus group played an important role in this

interview as most members referred to our discussion and what they had learned from one another. As previously mentioned, all the interviews were voice recorded and later transcribed. These transcriptions became the data for me to explore and discuss my co-researchers' stories.

Another formal aspect of this study were the journals these women were asked to keep. One woman committed to the journal format and wrote several, long, and in-depth journals. The others were reluctant about what to write. I provided them with some prompting questions (see Appendix D for questions) about the reality of their lived experiences compared to societal perceptions. The rest of the women felt more comfortable with this format and emailed their responses to me. In addition to these data sources, this study also includes several informal discussions I had with these women. As I previously mentioned, the initial meetings occurred in a local coffee shop. Discussions that occurred in social gatherings became an extension of our formal interviews. This is not to mention the long talks I had with those who were my friends prior to this study in different occasions. I tried to document these informal sources of information in my researcher notes and memos.

Throughout this process I was responsible for the procedural aspects of designing and carrying out this research under Purdue University's ethical code of conduct. As a result, I was responsible for obtaining the IRB, collecting and analyzing the data, and presenting and publishing the findings of the study. However, based on narrative inquiry's ontoepistemological stance, I acknowledge my positionality in the research process. Narrative inquiry rejects the notion of a distant and disengaged researcher. As an international hijabi Muslim woman, I was a participating member in the study. I walked alongside my fellow researchers to form a relationship that was conducive to storytelling and the collective creation of our narratives in a particular time and place (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). As a graduate student in the department of Curriculum and

Instruction and a teacher of more than 10 years, I used my skills and knowledge to cultivate in-depth and critical discussions regarding the pervasive Islamophobic discourse and how it affects the lived experiences international hijabi Muslim women studying at our university.

Making Sense of the Puzzlement

Making sense of our experiences within the entangled web of sociopolitical discourse, global politics, and history—all the while remaining faithful to narrative inquiry's holistic and contextual nature—became increasingly complicated. In my commitment to preserve the wholeness of these accounts, rather than dissecting them into fragments (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), I adopted two strategies. First, I combined both narrative description and description of narrative to create a hybrid between the two. These two methods are the common approaches of presenting narrative data. Narrative descriptions take a holistic approach to human existence in the sense that human experience/action is seen as situated within a certain context. These descriptions integrate a variety of events, happenings, and experiences to create a temporal whole. Description of narrative attempts to find common themes among the participants' stories (Polkinghorne, 1995). I found both approaches complementary and beneficial to discussing our experiences in a meaningful manner. Hence, I used a hybrid approach. I utilized a variety of research methods (e.g., interviews, journals, focus group discussions, and informal observations) to create an in-depth narrative of our experiences. I also used literary tools, such as metaphors and symbolism, in my use of composite characters (Patton & Catching 2009).

Second, in line with postcolonial theory's stance to acknowledge and validate alternate ways of knowing, I used an old method to present our stories. Many ancient cultures have used some variety of a fireside chat to narrate stories, transfer knowledge, and share wisdom. As

Solorzano and Yosso (2002) explained, oral traditions have historically been adopted by many minoritized populations (e.g. African Americans, Chicana/Chicanos, and Native Americans) as a method for survival and tool for liberation. They play a significant role in countering the master narrative of their context. As I would like this study to attain all of the above goals in an environment that is conducive to creating mutual understanding and meaningful relations, I use the fireside chat format to present our stories. The next chapters will feature discussions between Heba and me and Najma and me regarding our lived experiences in the US context. Through these discussions I create a narrative of our experiences that aims to paint a detailed picture of this period of our lives, within our specific context, and at this particular time in history. However, as I narrate these stories, I categorize them under different sub-headings and themes to provide an easy-to-follow flow for my readers. Accordingly, the reader/listener is also present at our fireside chat. The intersection of these stories with those who come across them opens new spaces to view life through other people's lenses. We allow others to look at life through ours. As we walk through life, we construct images of who and what we are, who others are, our connections, and how both we and they relate to the world. Hence, I use this study as a venue for people to create relationships that disrupt the formation of one-sided, biased, and stereotypical tropes. I aim to provide the reader/listener with the means to understand themselves and others more holistically and realistically (Clandinin, 2013).

These narratives also encompass our ideologies, worldviews, hopes, aspirations, motivations, and ideals (Polkinghorne, 1995). As they take life in the form of stories, my hope is to connect with the reader/listener on two levels: first, they *hail* their characters to adopt specific roles; second, they call our listeners to identify with us and view themselves in our shoes. Althusser names this phenomenon *interpellation*. During this process, ideologies shift, new alliances form,

and acts of resistance take shape. *Interpellation* occurs at a subconscious level on which people encounter new stories based on the individual stories they have constructed for themselves and the collective stories they have acquired from their given cultures. These stories are formulated subconsciously and act as filters through which people interact with unfamiliar stories. Despite their familiarity and comfort, they are not rigid or static through time and place. Novel stories have the capacity to ‘ambush’ one’s ‘inner library’ and create a space for new narratives to be formed (Frank, 2010). Bowman (2006) also explains that both grand narratives and small narratives are inherently valuable if we understand their position as stories and “storied.” Hence, my goal is to create a transformative space, not only for individual readers/listeners but also in the social context we are situated in.

In the US context of mass exposure to one-sided stories offered by the media, it is imperative that the stories of the Muslim population, particularly of Muslim women, be heard. These overlooked stories are as important as those that are heard (Frank, 2010), if not more important. The larger sociopolitical discourse plays an integral role in dictating which stories are heard and which are ignored. Dismissed stories need to be heard, not only to offer the larger society insight into marginalized populations’ lived experiences and the reality of their lives, but also to provide them with a platform to relate to others. As Frank (2010) claims, people not only live in stories but also connect to another via stories. Stories organize people into collective groups through which new stories are born. The pervasive antagonism toward the Muslim population in the US—largely based on stereotypes which lead to discrimination, marginalization, and othering (Asmar, Proude, & Inge, 2004; Cole & Ahmadi, 2003; Perry, 2013; Seggie & Sanford, 2010)—can be addressed through the exchange of stories. Hence, our narratives not only become a means for communicating with the ‘other’ and forming relations (Frank, 2010), but also aim to inform

and educate the general population (Thomas, 2012). By forming a relationship with our readers/listeners and engaging them in our fireside chat, we aspire to provide an alternative story to the dominant metanarrative (Huber, Caine, Huber, & Steeves, 2013).

CHAPTER 5. NAJMA

An Invitation

I first met Najma at an event in the Muslim community. This is definitely not one of the proudest moments of my life, as I turned to a friend next to me and asked, what is *she* doing here? I cannot put the tone of my question into words, but it was a sense of confusion with an underlying assumption that she did not belong there. My friend, detecting my tone, took me to Najma and introduced us to one another. Since then, Najma became one of my closest friends in the Muslim community. Why did I choose to openly discuss an utterly embarrassing internal thought processes of mine? The reason is multilayered. I chose to open this chapter with this memory as it became one of the greatest learning experiences of my life. As a Muslim woman coming from Iran, one of the few countries in the world that wearing the hijab is mandated by law, my presumption was that I could not possibly hold any prejudices toward women who cover. However, I had to learn that breaking free from prejudices and stereotypes is not a point that once you arrive at, you earn a badge that reads *prejudice free*. It rather is a journey of historical analysis, sociopolitical questioning, self-exploration, reflexivity, learning, and re-learning. It is a never-ending cyclical road of discovery, in which learning about yourself and your context opens the door to even deeper learning and further discoveries.

This encounter was an enlightening experience for me on multiple levels. The first, was that regardless of my background of being born and raised in a predominantly Muslim context, I had yet to disrupt a common stereotype of mine and the context that perpetuated it.

As mentioned earlier, wearing the hijab is mandated by law in Iran, however, covering the face or wearing the niqab is an uncommon scene. Hence, an ‘other’ was constructed in my mind of fellow sisters who choose to wear the niqab. Reflecting on this constructed stereotype, in addition to the lack of critical thinking on my part, I found it rooted in the antagonizing political discourse of the Iranian context toward Arab nations in the region, particularly Saudi Arabia. A constructed stereotype, needless to say misinformed, that assumes that all Saudi women cover their faces and are universally deprived of basic rights. I specifically focus on Saudi Arabia, since Iran and Saudi Arabia have historically had a rather complicated religious, political, and economic relationship. It took me several years of traveling and living in multiple international contexts and meeting a diverse array of Muslim sisters to discover, unpack, and dismantle this persisting stereotype of mine toward niqabi women.

This brings me to the second reason I discuss this experience. I would like to use this honest vulnerability as a means to extend an invitation to the readers of this manuscript, to sit with us, listen carefully, think critically, and reflect genuinely. I encourage you to embrace this opportunity to analyze the sociopolitical rhetoric that gives birth to antagonism toward and ‘othering’ of certain populations, in this case Muslim women. I repeat myself, in a world where political discourse revolves around building walls, my hope is to create a bridge for deeper understanding of ourselves and our constructed ‘others’. Furthermore, in a less academic sense, when communicating with the ‘other’ you might find a friend that you would have missed out on otherwise. Had I not taken that first step to meet Najma, I would have lost a friend that continues to amaze me to this very day.

Fireside Chat

To learn from and about one another, I invite you to sit on this fireside chat with me, Heba, and Najma. I use the metaphor of a fireside chat for multiple reasons. First, to pay tribute to the valuable knowledge and wisdom that has historically been passed down generation by generation through oral traditions. This is before the written word took precedence over oral traditions. Second, the tradition of sitting around a focal point, often times the fire, takes deep roots in many minoritized cultures, such as the Native populations, decedents from African cultures, and many Middle-Eastern regions (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Hence, I use this metaphor as a commitment to our roots and as a means to honor a long-standing tradition. Third, in line with post-colonial theory's stance in disrupting academia's monopoly on knowledge, what it entails, and how it can be attained, I choose the context of a fireside chat to reimagine spaces that knowledge is constructed and transferred. For me, this metaphor serves as a tool to reclaim a space that has historically been dominated by western forms of knowing. It destabilizes what is accepted as center and what is considered to be periphery (Connell, 2014; Gandhi, 1998). For example, in Iran, there is a long-standing tradition that all members of the family gather around a central point, often some form of a heating device, in which grandparents tell stories to the younger generations. The underlying premise is to teach certain lessons, often related to ethics and matters of right/wrong, to their family. It is a place to share and gain wisdom via stories. But also to learn from one another through a meaningful connection. The way I think about it is a relational learning space. This is how I also conceptualize this notion of a fireside chat. Last, as I have emphasized throughout this manuscript, I would like our conversations to become a genuine dialogue on what it means to be a hijabi Muslim from the Middle-East and navigate the realm of academe in a Midwestern institute in the US. I believe the informality of a fireside chat also creates a sense of comfort that allows for

difficult discussions to take place. To create dialogue at a larger scale, I invite you to sit by us in this fireside chat.

As we sit together, I would like to introduce you to the other voices that are present at the circle. The most prominent of these voices are Heba's, Najma's, and that of my own stories. Since our experiences do not occur in a vacuum, I also include the predominant sociopolitical and historical discourse as a symbolic presence that interacts and informs our experiences. Additionally, I use related scholarship as another symbolic presence at the circle to help us make sense of and explain our experiences, while building on previous conversations on the topic. As I narrate our stories, I also include the interrelation and interdependence of these multiple voices. I sit with Najma and Heba for our chat and we start by who knows who and how. In doing so, we choose to accept our constructed universal image of Muslim women as a blessing. We decide to use this involuntary bundling into a monolithic group as a means to get closer and embrace it as an opportunity to know one another. I use the words *choose* and *decide* because we are well aware of our often-overlooked internal differences and conflicts. Differences that continue to overshadow many interactions in the Muslim community. Sitting around the fire together, we acknowledge our disagreements, however, we use them as a learning platform to grow beyond the prejudices that we carry from our backgrounds. During our conversation, we discuss, religion, politics, media, both in our home countries and the US. Through our discussions on the larger sociopolitical discourse, we oscillate between personal stories and political rhetoric. Our conversation was not necessarily comfortable. We had moments of deep disagreements, unconformable silences, and tearful exchanges. However, we sat with this discomfort realizing that growth is not necessarily a comfortable process.

There are multiple voices present around the fire. Throughout the next two chapters, each of these voices join in to contribute to the discussion of this manuscript. However, this chapter mainly revolves around my conversations with Najma. Its main goal is to center Najma's experiences. As I narrate these experiences, Heba, voices of scholarship, and sociopolitical discourse pitch in to clarify, elaborate, and expand on my discussion with Najma. They join in to complement and contextualize Najma's individual stories. In the next chapter, I narrate Heba's stories, centering her voice.

Najma

In many ways Najma is an average international student. She is talented and driven in the work she does and passionate about issues pertaining to her studies and research. She has been through the variety of ups and downs that international students go through as they transition into their new context, mainly adapting to a new life within an entirely different cultural setting. As an international student, she continues to struggle with certain aspects of life in a new country such homesickness, loneliness, discrimination, and alienation among others (Bonazzo & Wong, 2007; Karimi, Akiyama, & Deng, 2016; Lee & Rice, 2007; Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2008; Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010; Spencer-Rodgers & McGovern, 2002). These feelings might never entirely fade for international students; however, they tend to fluctuate based on an array of internal and external factors. So, Najma continues to acclimate to the complexities of establishing a life in a new context.

On the other hand, I find Najma unique in many ways. I admire her strong faith and courage in wearing a niqab in the US Midwest. Even as a hijabi woman, I cannot begin to comprehend what it would mean to be a niqabi in this context. Remaining true to one's identity in a place that continually rejects and questions you, is not an easy choice. Beyond mere adherence to her faith

and cultural background, she impresses me in how she navigates different aspect of social life. I have seen her engage in discussions about Islam, her choice of attire, and the typical position of women in Islam question. These discussions stem from her deep belief in and knowledge of her faith and her commitment to educating people about it. I always enjoy my conversations with Najma as I find them a learning experience for me. She has deep knowledge and is well read on Islam, its history, and its philosophical foundation, which contributes to my personal knowledge base and understanding of these subjects. At another level, what makes our conversations and Najma's character unique is that she is well aware of the larger sociopolitical rhetoric, on global and local levels. She has a critical analysis of events and public discourse in relation to her personal experiences. Moreover, her social and articulate personality make conversations with her fun and insightful. Despite all this, she speaks of an exhaustion that discourages her from continuing down the same path:

I'm so tired. And this is not how I felt when I first came, this is gradually over the years. I'm just tired. Sometimes I am just tired. I do not want to be Islam 101 all the time. I'm not saying, I don't want people to come and talk to me, to ask me, and I do want to impart knowledge and information and all of it. Because otherwise how would we learn? But sometimes I am just tired, right? I'm just like, I am up for the conversation, but then there's those people who come and ask you, it's that passive aggressive way where they're asking you not because they want to know more. It's like, why do you do that, you know? And those moments, I usually ignore. But if they push for it, I'm like I don't want to sit and give you a lecture right now or to explain it and stuff. I'm tired. I'm just a person who I am. You can tell, it's been 5 plus years and I'm tired at this point. There's a lot of times I feel despite all my efforts, I used to be, you remember me, I used to be much more active in

talking to people and bridging differences, all of this stuff. I just mean on a general scale, despite all of that, I am bending myself backward trying to make ourselves more known, I don't want to say more acceptable because I feel like we should not morph ourselves to an acceptable version of what society wants us to be, whether it's our religion, culture or ethnicity. I feel like who we are is perfectly correct, perfectly right in its way and we need to pass that forward to people rather than conform. I don't know what it's called, this strange compliance. And you can hear my tone now, it frustrates me. But I just feel like, so many times, it just feels futile. (Najma, Individual Interview, April 2017)

This sense of exhaustion and discouragement from the futility of our attempts to be nice, to be open, and to educate people is a running theme that I discuss in the following sections.

State of Tension

As I start delving deeper into our experiences with Heba and Najma, I receive two opposing responses regarding their lived experiences in the US. At first, I am puzzled. I do not know what to make of this contradiction. However, as I probe deeper, ask more question, and further discuss their different approaches, I notice an ironic similarity. When I asked Heba how she would explain her overall experience in the US, her immediate response was, pretty good. However, Najma's response to a similar question was that a lot has happened and she does not know where to begin. With Heba, I find that she has a lot to share. However, she has chosen to highlight the positive and ignore the negative in her mind. Najma, on the other hand, tends to acknowledge the negative, even though she does not talk about it much. Despite me and Najma being close friends for several years, she had never shared her stories with me as a friend. She has two main reasons for keeping silent about these stories, first, she did not believe that sharing them would change anything.

Second, she does not want to be ‘that’ Muslim person. These two points summarize the underlying reason for both their responses. I explain this to myself as the negation of their agency by positioning them in extremes. What I mean by this is that any choice they make has a potential backlash. They become either an oppressive subject and threatening or an oppressed object and always threatened (Perry, 2008). In simple terms, regardless of what they say and what they do about it, they are reduced to simple colonial binaries (Afshar, 2014). (Researcher notes, October 2017)

I wrote the above paragraph in my researcher’s journal as I was reflecting on my conversations with Heba and Najma. It is a sense that I can understand because I can relate to as a Muslim woman and international student, but describing it in words rarely does it justice. I use the term *state of tension* to describe the overall climate that we navigate on a daily basis. As I elaborate, I intend to convey the message that beyond a certain point, societal discourse affects the lives of Muslim women more than mere individual incidents, to the point that it becomes the state they live in. For example, within our daily encounters we navigate invisibility and hypervisibility, we explicate the reality of our beliefs and lived experiences and how they contradict with the common perception, and we are continuously defending our right to a home as we define it. In summary, it feels like we are constantly disassembling and reassembling ourselves and this is what I call a *state of tension*. What do I mean by living in a state of tension? I grew up in a family of engineers. What I understand from their conversations, tension is when a certain object is being pulled by two equal forces in opposite directions. To describe it in simple terms, it is when a game of tug-o-war is not moving in either side’s favor even though both sides are pulling on the rope. Now, why do I describe our experiences as a state of tension? Even though on the surface, from an outsider’s perspective, everything appears to be stable, if examined more carefully, there are actually strong

forces pulling in opposite directions, constantly tugging on us. I will elaborate on this point in the following sections.

The Tension of Home

Najma: I remember one bad experience and it was at the beginning when I came here and wasn't able to speak English very well, and also my husband, and we needed to fill our car with gas. I wear the niqab, it was something weird for people. I went to a woman, I asked her to help us to use the machine to fill our gas tank and I was holding my card to show her that I'm not, I don't need money, I just want you to help me how to use it. I really don't know because in her country we don't fill the gas like that. We have workers who do everything for you and you pay them the money using cash, not credit card. So, she screamed go away and it was really, it was really hard to hear. I cried that day actually. And then another nice woman helped us, but I felt that she was scared.

Me: She screamed? like literally screamed?

Najma: The first lady. Yeah, she's screamed. She shouted at me and she said, go away, go back home. I cried because of her that day. When this accident happened to me and I decided later that I will never do that to anyone. Even if I was scared. It's really not nice.

(Najma, Individual Interview, September 2017)

Najma recalls this incident as one the worst experiences in her life. Speaking of experience and scholarship in the field, for international students the early days of life in their new context includes dealing with confusion, isolation, loss of familiar systems and social support, language barrier, and cultural shock amongst many other conflicting emotions (Bonazzo & Wong, 2007; Guillen & Li, 2011; Karimi, Akiyama, & Deng, 2016; Klomegah, 2006; Lee & Rice, 2007; Sawir,

Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2008; Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Spencer-Rodgers & McGovern, 2002). In addition to these sentiments, being denied the right to establish a sense of connection with the place they have chosen to reside in seems to be one of Najma's greatest challenges. As Najma continues to speak, she finds one of her most prominent struggles to be forming a relationship with her new context as home. When thinking of home, the largest unit of association is often national boundaries (Duara, 1996; Smith, 1996). The undergirding discourse of national affiliation and citizenship within different contexts, grants certain people the right to a home while denying the same right from others (Balibar, 1996; Chatterjee, 1986). It fits well within the colonial construct of binaries. An 'us' versus 'them' mentality that rejects certain groups of people the basic feeling of belonging. When it comes to Muslim people, despite their legal citizenship in western countries, they are still considered as an 'other' that has been imposed on that setting (Calhoun, 1997; Chatterjee, 1986; Duara, 1996; McClintock, 1997). The concept of home becomes further contentious when crossing borders in the modern world. While one has the legal right to live in a certain country, they still do not belong. Within this entangled web of colonial legal technicalities, sociopolitical discourse, media's vilification of Muslim populations and common misconceptions, Najma struggles to establish a home for herself and her family.

I feel that a lot, even after 5 plus years, I don't fit in and I knew I wouldn't fit in. Because I chose to dress the way I do dress. In my Muslim and ethnic and cultural garments and I'm outspokenly Muslim when I step out on the street without saying a word, you know, it's here. So just covering my face speaks louder than just doing a hijab. I was aware of all of that. My husband still dresses the way we do back home, my son does, all of that. It's just from the family and upbringing I come from. And despite expecting that, it has still been

harder. And I think mainly because of the nuances and connotations attached with what people think when they see someone like me. And this is something I deal with on a daily basis and work on separately in projects as well on how to change that perception. Because the predominant vision of a person like me comes with very negative baggage. And that is not who we are, that is not who I am and it's not just my story, it's the story of millions of eastern females. And that's something I want to reach out and tell people, but I can't reach out in the same way that a lot of others can because just my reaching out comes as a threat for some way or another.

One of the other paradoxes that I have, because this is very loaded, I do want to tell you this. One other thing is that people perceive me as a threat just because of the way I look or where I come from or whatever, whereas I actually feel threatened. I fear for my safety and that's not changed. In fact, it's gotten worse in the 5 years here. I've always been scared. I've had many incidents. And somehow, maybe because I have covered since I was 12 and onward, or maybe I am a little more resilient because of my international exposure or something, I am able to walk past more or less every incident. But it's there. And there was that adjustment going back to the crux of the question, when I first came and it continues. I've learned to, like, go with the flow here, but I still feel a stranger in this land. But the funny thing is, this is the only place I know as home since I got married. I know this sounds sad, but it is. There is a lot of times I've cried because of this, you know.

(Najma, Individual Interview, April 2017)

At this point in her life Najma has navigated the global bureaucracies of attaining a visa and residing legally in the US. However, she cannot escape the prevailing colonial discourse of a fundamental divide between anything considered eastern and what is known to be western

(Bhambra, 2015; Dirlik, 1994; Garner & Selod, 2014; Said, 1979; Said, 1994). Furthermore, the media's continual antagonization of Muslims as an eternal 'other' and positioning them as the binary opposite to 'us' (Cesari, 2004; Ewing, 2008; Garner & Selod, 2014), has created an environment in which despite overcoming various legal hurdles, Najma is denied the feeling of home. Najma understands the multilayered and complex reasons that deny her the right to feel at home. However, she is not willing to adopt a similar frame of reference. She speaks of what home means to her and the frame she uses to find a home in the interconnected world we live in.

And that's not any hate to the place. Like I said, I love this place. This is my home. The only home I know since marriage and my home for the past five years. I don't know where life goes next. Back home was my childhood home. This is where my baby was born. I have all this sentimental value and attachment to it. We say in Arabic 'أرض الله واسعة', God's land is vast. That's the way I see it. All of these countries are vast and at the same and the land of God. (Najma, Individual Interview, April 2017)

Najma's reference to the Islamic conceptualization of the world comes as a surprise to me. Despite my exposure to the concept, I had never consciously thought of the world as a vast land in which we are encouraged to travel through and learn from one another. It also reminds me how entrenched we have all become in the colonial structuring of the world (Duara, 1996; Smith, 1996). A fragmented world in which loyalties and enemies are defined based on arbitrary borders and definitions that we, as humans, decided to establish. And this abstract construction has become such an integral component of our lives that we cannot imagine the world any differently.

As I try to make sense of the intricacies that are involved in denying Najma her fundamental need to find a home in a context that she has been residing in for more than five years, she speaks of an internal struggle about the matter.

Maybe I don't feel at home because since I came here, I have this feeling that I am here just for a temporary time, getting my degree. So, I don't feel at home. I miss a lot of things from my home. So no, I don't feel at all at home. I don't know if it's a negative thing or a good thing, but I don't feel that. (Najma, Individual Interview, September 2017)

However, she does not seem to be convinced with her own point. She continues,

Maybe it's hard for people who are, uh, who are, you know, living here, it's really hard for them because they want to feel that this is their home and they hear these bad things. They will, they will feel so bad. But since I'm feeling that I'm going home, I'm fine with that. I don't care. I don't want to make it an issue because if we make it an issue, I will not be able to do anything in my life. I just try to be careful. Don't go late outside. I've tried to avoid all these accidents. I'm here to get a degree and go back to my country, so I don't want to make these issues affect my life and affect my progress and my studies and these things. That's why I choose to ignore them. If I chose to make them a big issue, I will not be able to do anything in my life. (Najma, Individual Interview, September 2017)

Najma's internal conflict is informed by the contested space she occupies as an international student, a Muslim woman, and a niqabi. The predominant sociopolitical rhetoric believes she does not belong in the context she is trying to establish a new life with her family. At the intersection of her need to find a home and the common social perception regarding her belonging, she experiences a constant push and pull in opposing directions. One informed by a deeply-rooted internal need as a human, and the other propagated by the historical colonial discourse that continues to shape not only modern structures and legal bureaucracies, but also our collective worldviews. The predefined notion of who belongs where, has imposed a constant tension in Najma's life, one she finds exhausting to navigate and impossible to break free from.

My conversations with Najma, takes me down a stream of consciousness of seemingly disoriented thoughts. As we speak, I think of all the out dated and limiting technicalities and bureaucracies that continue to shape people's experiences at many levels. I think of all the DACA children that fear losing the only home they know. I also think of Muslim populations that are continuously considered as outsiders despite having lived in the US their entire lives. I also think of my personal struggle in defining a home based on rigid constructions of citizenship and national boundaries. Having lived in Iran, Australia, England, and the US for extended periods of time, I struggle with identifying and committing to one as my only home. At this point of my life and career, I do not know where my next step will take me. However, I embrace its open-endedness as an opportunity to live in, learn from, and connect to a new context. As I bring this up with Najma and Heba, they both agree that their next step is ambiguous to them as well. Compared to many, we are amongst the privileged that we have both the options and choice in where we choose to live. I think of the many displaced people due to genocide, war, and famine. How do they navigate life in a context that denies them feeling at home? Does the feeling of home need to be a lifelong commitment in a world that people move around more than ever? Furthermore, does the notion of home need to be an either/or scenario in which people are required to choose one place over another? More importantly, does an emotion as deep and meaningful as feeling at home need to be informed by and entangled with politics of exclusion and 'othering'?

As I think about the construction of home in modern society, Heba speaks of her opinion regarding the matter. She speaks of a sense of responsibility in challenging and changing the systems that inadvertently position us as the 'other':

But is there a responsibility for us in it. Because a lot of times to me it's like OK, I'm just one person and as you said I might go back home, or I'll graduate at some point or I don't

know. Things are going to change for me. But then I think how about the other women that might come to Purdue or I don't know for example for me going to the gym is like how about other hijabi women that might go to the gym in the future. Do I want to change anything for them? But you know what I'm saying, do we have responsibility or it's just so for me. (Heba, Focus Group Discussion, October 2017)

Heba is right, maybe there is a responsibility for everyone amidst all this.

The Tension of Threat

When it comes to the threat or fear rhetoric, the predominant discourse on the threat of Muslim women to western societies is informed by opposing views. These perceptions oscillate from the image of a threatened and oppressed Muslim woman in need of saving, to a violent, untrustworthy, and threatening Muslim woman (Perry, 2008). This confusion regarding who a Muslim woman really is, invokes actions and sentiments based on mere misconceptions. On one hand, women such as Najma are seen as a source of threat, to be feared; on the other hand, these very women are exposed to actions that threaten their safety or position them as the 'other' to say the least.

And that's the other thing, the fear factor, it's increased for me because a lot of incidents have become more aggressive now. To exemplify, when my baby was just 3 weeks old, we were pregnancy buddies, me and my other friend, you know her, she gave birth three weeks after my child and I went to see her at the hospital and I took my baby with me, you know, we're showing each other our babies, and my husband was coming with the baby bag, he was a good few meters behind me, because he parked the car, it was still winter, you know. I had a November baby, she had a December baby, so I was like I'm going to take the car

seat and get to the door of the hospital sooner. At the entrance of the hospital there were these 5 guys, big guys, you know, and I'm a small person, and I have my baby and I was going through postpartum depression and they came quite close and they're like, why are you here? Are you here to bomb up the place? Yeah, they said are you here to bomb the place? Blow up the place? And that was, it was not my first incident, but it was the first after my baby and you become this mama bear, you're adjusting to the baby not being in your belly anymore and they're outside and you're like, OMG I have to protect it against the world.

The only thing I could do was keep calm, keep walking, it was hard for me to keep my feet moving because you just get paralyzed with fear. Because it's like 5 guys and as a female you're always scared at multiple levels not just physical assault, there's much more kinds of assault that you're scared of. You're just more vulnerable as a female. And I was just like, I have to get through that front door because at the front door there's a receptionist sitting a few feet inside and hope and pray that the receptionist would be there God forbid something happens. I did not turn and they were just like, hey and they were coming pretty close and I don't know how, I made it inside. Literally, I just stepped inside the door and I put down the car seat and I broke down. And I was like shaking, I was crying, trembling. My husband walked in and he was like, what the heck happened to you? They had moved on forward by then. They weren't hovering at the door. And I babbled whatever I could muster right then. He was like, let me go after them, you know how husbands are, they're protective and I was like, no no no, they'll beat you up. Five big guys against you. He's a nice, tall, strong, guy but come on, he can't take on 5 people. (Najma, Individual Interview, April 2017)

Najma's story exemplifies the ironic juxtaposition of the threatened and the threatening. While the five adult men threaten and come close to physically assaulting a rather small in size woman with her baby in her hand, based on the predominant societal discourse, they identify and position her as the threat. The irony is also how these presumptions and real actions interact. The presumption was that Najma was a potential source of danger; however, in actuality they were the ones that inflicted a sense of fear on her and her family. In addition to outward forms of aggression, Najma also recalls cases that were subtler in nature based on similar misconceptions:

People start acting differently because you look different. That gets to me sometimes. For example, once I went to Einstein Bagels and there was a police officer buying his own bagel, right. He's just chilling, holding his coffee. But the moment I stepped in he suddenly stiffens up, he stands straighter. I'm like dude, have your coffee, I'm here for a bagel too, you know. And then it's like, his hand goes to his belt. He's alert, he's ready. That part bothers me the stereotype that's fed into it. That difference bothers me. If I was like in a tank top and shorts and blond or something, he would not become alert that way. So that difference bothers me. But like Heba said, I like to just ignore it. It's about them, it's not about me. So often just ignore and you move forward. You have to like push that feeling and you ignore it and that's how it just doesn't spoil your day. (Najma, Focus Group Discussion, October 2017)

Such major or minor incidents become the state we live in on a daily basis. The main characteristic of this state is that cloud of misconceptions, misjudgments, prejudices, and stereotypes follow us. Despite the baselessness of such presumptions, they become a push-pull factor and a constant company we are positioned to deal with as part of navigating daily life. I will expand on this point in the following sections.

The Tension of Reality

And then there's all this stuff, there's this notion, oh, they have to be saved. Right? Like, woman like us, they need to be saved. No. We need to be accepted and recognized for who we are and empowered and encouraged to keep going forward. Like you'd encourage everyone else. And saving is there for the people who are suffering, in every society, in every religion, in every culture. And do it as a more global, united front. Rather than single it out based on misjudgment. Come live with us in the Gulf and get to know us, Pakistan or the Arab countries or the Middle-East, whatever. If we were in such dilemmas, we would not be happily leading our lives, the way alhamdulillah the majority are. (Najma, Individual Interview, April 2017)

Najma points to the long-standing perceptions regarding Muslim women. She also points to a more complex sociopolitical matter. She refers to a simple reality that when it comes to the Muslim community the choices and actions of a minority become the representative of the whole community. As a result, we are continuously defined and questioned based on points and matters that could not be further from our realities. Najma believes this is due to the single story that is constantly propagated by the media:

It's really hard. Media plays an important role here and media doesn't say a lot of good things about us. And even when they say they only focus on bad things, they won't focus on good things. In Iran, in [name of country], all countries, they don't focus on good things. They don't focus on good woman and the accomplishments that women are doing in my country and other countries, they only focus on one problem. In my country, [name of country], they don't focus on good things or positive things. It is really hard. I don't know

if you could make a change in the media, that would be the solution for everything. (Najma, Individual Interview, September 2017)

Adichie (2009) talked about the danger of this single story. As this one-side, prejudiced story becomes the predominant discourse, we are then expected to compare and contrast the reality of our lived experiences with this predisposition. More often than not, the constructed image that is imposed on us is so alien to us that we do not know where to begin to deconstruct and reconstruct it. I will use my personal experiences to elaborate. I have given many presentations in the local community, in schools, or on campus about Iran. In these presentations, I provide a general background about myself, explaining the places I have studied, worked, and lived. Then I present on different aspects of Iran including its nature, history, culture, architecture, and food. Similar to the norm of many presentations, I then open up to questions and answers. During most if not all these presentations, the first question asked is *can women go to school in Iran?* Since I am completing a Ph.D. degree in the US and given the fact that I have lived half my life in Iran, I find it self-explanatory that women can go to school in Iran. Also, unlike the common perception, public education is mandatory in Iran for both girls and boys. In fact, the latest results from our national entrance exam indicate that the number of girls admitted to public universities is seventy percent of all seats compared to the thirty percent of boys and this number is on the rise. This is one example of the disparity between the reality of my life and general conception. Hence, when faced with the question, my initial response is why wouldn't girls be allowed to go to school? Then, I encounter the harsh truth that public perception regarding my Muslimness and Iranianness is very different from my reality, if not polar opposites. This continuous encounter with our constructed image creates a sense of tension and urgency to not only explain, but also justify ourselves. What I call the internal struggle of the oriental. "This is the internal struggle of the

oriental who has come to view itself through the western gaze and seeks to justify itself based on the standard imposed on it through western values. A sense of justifying which seeks to prove its value to the questioning west, attempting to prove its similarity or successful imitation of the west. The internal struggle is all too common in all our scenarios. Despite the weariness, almost all the above situations and many similar ones are accompanied by our attempts to justify and to translate eastern culture into western values. The attempt is not necessarily to explain but to justify because based on a set of outside standards we are never good enough and we can never live up to the expectations. The outside pressure and the internal struggle interrelate to create a sense of apathy that is a result of living in a context as an 'other'. This 'othering' happens in subtle ways. It could be sensed or felt in the questions asked, in the way people look at you, their attitudes or demeanor. It is these subtle cues that one does not know how to respond or react to." (Karimi, 2016)

Said (1979) elaborated that since the identity of the orient itself is constructed by the west and for the west, the oriental's reality takes backstage. Hence, we are constantly positioned to explain, prove, and justify ourselves.

The Tension of Islam

In addition to the disparity between the reality of our lived experiences and what the public conceives these experiences to be, our interpretation of Islam is vastly different from public conception. This is not to say that our understandings of the religion are unanimous. In addition to our personal interpretations and thought processes, we bring in the history and culture of our particular context in how we interpret Islam. Furthermore, our relationships with our belief and our adherence to it does not follow a straight path. Rather, it encounters the usual ups and downs, and transforms through time and place. Najma writes about this relationship in her journal and how it contradicts with the common perception:

I won't lie to you. At some point, I had doubts about Islam because some people in my country mix between traditions and Islam. Sometimes if something doesn't agree with traditions, they might prevent it under the name of Islam, even if it is halal. And some people are racist against those who are from mixed races. I started to feel uncomfortable, especially that my family is from different races. Also, how people used to think of non-Muslims is so messed up. For example, when I was 16, one of my teachers told us that to be a strong Muslim you should not show any sign of weakness to non-Muslims. Here is an example she used to explain her statement: 'For instance, if you were walking in a road and an old man or woman who is non-Muslim tried to pass you, you should not let them because that is a sign of weakness. God doesn't like weak Muslims.' At that moment my mind was blowing. Unfortunately, in my country we were not allowed to question our teachers or professors. I really hated that!! However, thanks to Allah this way of thinking has changed recently. I had started questioning when I was 20. I decided that I have to read about Islam myself. I should stop listening to people without questioning their resources. When I have a question about Islam, I READ and SEARCH. I was shocked!! I found a lot of beautiful meanings in Islam that do NOT agree with what they do and say. I decided to not judge any belief by its followers. For example, now even if I saw a bad Christian, I don't blame Christianity.

Here are some of the beautiful meanings in Islam that I really love: First of all, Islam encourages questioning: 'Bring forth your argument, if you are telling the truth!' (chapter 27: verse 64). Allah doesn't want us to believe blindly. Second, Islam is totally against racism. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) prevented his companions from racism, and he called racism 'A detestable thing'. Third, Islam protects the freedom of believe. Allah said:

'There shall be no compulsion in [acceptance of] the religion.' (chapter 2: verse 256) And *'For you is your religion, and for me is my religion.'* (chapter 109: verse 6). Forth, in terms of dealing with non-Muslims prophet Muhammad (PBUH) [Peace be upon Him] was so nice to his non-Muslims neighbors and relatives. I read this beautiful hadith that showed how the prophet (PBUH) respected people whether they are Muslims or non-Muslims: *'A funeral passed the Messenger of Allah and he stood up, and it was said to him: It Is a Jew. He said: Is it not a soul?'* Fifth, Islam really focused on good manners. When the prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was teaching his companions how to be a good Muslim, he didn't ask them to be good only to Muslims but to all human beings. Here are some of his sayings:

1. *'No one of you becomes a true believer until he likes for his brother what he likes for himself.'* He didn't say your Muslim brother. He was talking about Muslims and non-Muslims.
2. *'The Muslim is the one from whose tongue and hand the people are safe, and the believer is the one people trust with their lives and wealth.'*
3. *'You [people] cannot satisfy people with your wealth but satisfy them with your cheerful faces and good morals.'*
4. *'Your smiling in the face of your brother is charity.'*

Furthermore, in the Quran, Allah has decreed *'[The] death of one innocent is equal to the death of humanity. And if anyone saved a life, it would be as if he saved the life of the whole people'* (chapter 5: verse 32) Islam really cares about all human beings no matter what their religions are. Also, at some point, I wondered what if Islam is just a legend? I'm a

scientific person, so faith alone was not enough for me. I wanted proofs. So, I started looking for proofs. I listened to lots of YouTube lectures, to Zakir Naik. He's a logical man. I liked how he uses logical answers to the questions and connects them to the Quran. Now I know why Islam is the right way. He wrote a book that discusses the scientific proofs that prove the existence of Allah, the book is (The Qur'an & Modern Science: Compatible or Incompatible?) by Zakir Naik. Now, I believe and have a strong faith in Allah. I know what my religion is, and I love being a Muslim. (Najma's Journal)

What Najma is trying to unpack in the scope of her journal is multilayered. At a personal level, she speaks of a journey that she finds meaningful and logical. She emphasizes the notion of reading and searching, to understand what her religion means to her. However, she also acknowledges the interconnectivity of a belief system with the specific traditions and culture of its context. She, herself, is critical of how others in her own context understand and practice Islam. She elaborates on how these traditions are positioned to represent Islam, either out of prejudice or ignorance or for propaganda purposes:

I remember that I have seen, I don't know, just like that big posters about, about how women in some cultures are killed because they got raped and they put a picture of a woman wearing hijab. I understand and I agree that some stupid cultures do that. Islam itself doesn't say that. It actually is, you know, I don't know if it's the killer penalty for the rapist, not the woman. So, they put the hijab, hijab is a sign of, it's an Islamic sign. So, you connect that punishment to Islam, which is really wrong. And I didn't like that here. Yeah, I've heard that in some cultures, a woman, if she got raped, then, I don't know if you know the word, they get shut off. And some people who are ignorant, they are not real Muslims, because Islam would never ever do something like that. She's the victim, the rapist is who

should be punished, but they killed her because this is something not good for their honor. They might kill her or killed the baby. That's not an Islamic thing. They should not use a picture of a woman wearing hijab in that poster, because they will connect it to Islam, which is not good, not nice. (Najma, Individual Interview, September 2017)

She further criticizes the role of media outlets in equating Islam with violence and terrorism, while in the process, antagonizing Muslims:

I think media has washed people's minds. I know that the first idea comes to people's mind about Islam is 'terrorism'. Unfortunately, this idea is not only here, but it is also in some Arabic countries. I have seen some Arabs who told me that I'm exaggerating by wearing the niqab. A woman from an Arabic country a month ago was laughing at me and told that people will think that you are from ISIS! I was shocked. No one has the right to make fun of someone's beliefs, as long as they're not hurting anybody! We can discuss our believes and argue about what is correct and what is not, BUT we must respect each other! I hope media, here and in the Middle-East, starts highlighting good things about Islam and Muslims. (Najma's Journal)

What Najma rightly points to is every individual's inherent right to practice what they believe in, unless they are hurting another person. She also disrupts the misconception of equating Islam with the Middle-East. While Islam is the predominantly-practiced religion in the region, they are by no means synonymous. First, due to the basic fact that not all Middle-Easterners are Muslim and not all Muslims are Middle-Eastern. In a more comprehensive sense, what is practiced in the region, even in the name of Islam, is often a complicated mixture of culture, traditions, economics, and politics. When a system as dynamic as Islam is reduced to a rigid entity and the image is forced on the public through various outlets, we are constantly expected to dismantle these

misconceptions. To explain this point in simple terms, it is as if there are constantly fake rumors being spread about you and you are expected to explain or defy them. The baselessness of such rumors creates a sense of urgency to address them. In this state, the push to dismantle the prevailing misconceptions is faced by the urge to ignore them, as it is a burdensome and never-ending task. Hence, we are faced with an endless choice and catch-22-cycle of explanation versus silence, which at heart entails the burden of responsibility. I explain the responsibility and burden that such rhetoric places on Muslim women in the following section.

Burden of Truth

As I continue my conversations with Heba and Najma, we all come to the realization that navigating life in a context that constantly and consciously antagonizes the Muslim identity has become a continuous battle for representation and struggle for perfection. To elaborate, it is an internal feeling that we are constantly on the verge of making a life changing decision and our failure in making the right one entails repercussions for us as individuals and the entire Muslim community. To further clarify, I will have to explain the predominant societal discourse on Islam and Muslims. The basic presumption regarding Islam, propagated by the media and commonly accepted by the general public, is that there is a universal Islam with universal rulings, which in turn creates a universal Muslim identity. This presumption is most prevalent in the rhetoric on Sharia Law and its potential impact on the US society. It reappears in the chivalrous attempt to save Muslim women from oppression. Also, it is ironically present in the absence of any discussion on the different sects of Islam. The decontextualized discourse on Islam is another indication of assuming a universal identity for the religion. As a result, the burden of disrupting the misconceptions and stereotypes falls on the Muslim population, in this case Muslim women.

This burden is two-fold: The first burden, as previously mentioned, is correcting the prevailing misinformation. In centering Anglo-European assumptions, the burden of responsibility falls on Muslims to uneducate and then reeducate the public about Islam. This process is far more complicated than merely educating people, as it entails an extra step of uneducating people and then reeducating them. Moreover, it burdens individuals with a task that is beyond their normal capacities, in the sense that they become responsible for disrupting sociocultural and political discourse that has been built throughout history and is constantly propagated by the media. Second, in addressing stereotypes, Muslims are positioned to represent the entirety of Islam and become an ambassador for the entire Muslim community. The reality is, that even scholars who have dedicated their lives to the study of Islam cannot speak for all of its aspects, in all contexts, and throughout time. Like any other school of thought, Islam is closely connected to the social, cultural, historical, and political context of its time. I briefly explained some of these complexities in chapter one. However, in placing this burden on the shoulders of the Muslim population and requiring them to represent the religion and all the community, Heba and Najma find themselves struggling with the task of always being perfect.

Burden of Representation

The issue of representation became a contested topic amongst us. The complication was in our commitment to both sides of the spectrum. We all felt a sense of responsibility in representing an alternate image of Islam and Muslims than the one offered by the media. However, we also debated on the extent of this representation. Najma spoke of the exhaustion of being Islam 101 all the time:

I feel it would be nice, it would be relieving for me, if I didn't have to. Like of course, it's a responsibility upon us Muslims and stuff, but not like, for example, if I'm just going out

to eat somewhere, I don't have to be Islam 101 everywhere. You know, if I didn't have to do everything from scratch and have to do it all as much and people would act more normal around me. So that I don't have to always, educate everyone, all the time. I like doing that, I like responding to questions. But when it's something that I have to carry as a daily task or responsibility it can get tiring. So, it would help if we could meet halfway. If the campus or local community did something and then us as Muslims, the local and international Muslims. Of course, we do outreach and we speak and stuff like the MSA [Muslim Student Association] does stuff on campus, because being Muslim is such a big deal in the news nowadays. (Najma, Focus Group Discussion, October 2017)

In addition to the exhaustion caused by the impossible task of representing a religion of 1400 years and a community of more than two billion people, Najma points to a deeply-rooted colonial construct. She does not want to be liberated from her responsibility; however, she wants the responsibility shared by both parties involved, in this case the Muslim and non-Muslim communities. As a result of the historical centering of Anglo-European emotions, discourse, and values, those in the periphery are positioned to take responsibility not only for their own learning experience, but also that of those in the center. It reminds me of Hegel's master-slave relationship, in which anything the slave does is for the benefit of the master (Gandhi, 1998). This is manifested in the passive aggressive questions we are asked on a daily basis. Najma talked about the weight she carries around as a result of this:

It bothers me. It's like a) it's not the reality, b) it's not my fault. It's very frustrating but I can't be any other way. Unfortunately. So, it weighs down. For example, I go somewhere and I have to be, you know, it's part of our religion to answer questions, spread good of what you have learned. But we're all human and we're all trying. So sometimes, a lot of

times, it's becomes a burden. It is one of the reasons I was socially going everywhere and stuff in the past couple years. After a while I just got tired honestly speaking. I have to be like Islam 101 everywhere. ... It just gets exhausting. Meet me as a person. Yes, my person is Muslim. I am Muslim first and foremost before anything you know. But I don't want to sit and talk about the same beaten down questions, what are you hiding under that dress or why do women wear hijab. Yes, I like to talk about it but not all the time. A lot of times people are like: I'm trying to clear my understanding. And then they start asking these questions and you don't know what to make of it. It can be really tiring that you carry that responsibility all the time.

That's how I was at the beginning. I was very enthusiastic. But after a while, it started weighing down. Especially, when despite the answers, despite repeated clarifications, people ask the same questions. When will you learn? There's open and readily available information spoken and expressed everywhere. Then are you really asking? or did you really not do your research? Do you really not understand? Or are you just trying to, like, indirectly offend me or you really had to pass so-and-so comment? So maybe I've met many people and the message hasn't reached everyone yet? I don't know what it is. I want to work harder to get the message across. But like I said, it can get tiring because we also have regular life to live, right?

So, I feel like the effort is necessary from other people also to seek out and seek knowledge, to inform themselves. I coined myself, there's three types of people pretty much. In terms of, you know, learning. There's those that genuinely do not know. Right. So, they genuinely have probably never been exposed. They do not know, maybe they haven't had as much international exposure, traveled outside of even their state and stuff. The educated ones.

This is the easiest category. They know, they're educated and they have a positive outlook. The other category is the ones that generally do not know and will ask you.

So those that genuinely do not know you and they ask you, you can tell. They are really asking you. Whether it's based on what they've seen or what they know basically. They have that limited foundational knowledge I'd say. But then the last category is what bothers me. They are those that are willfully ignorant. So, they choose to stay ignorant. Or to be passive aggressive. They know where and how to access information, and not even access, it's right there in front of them. But they choose to look the other way. They choose to either establish a negative opinion or not seek knowledge about it. And just keep swimming in stereotypes. They're comfortable with. I think it's more uncomfortable for their notions of misconceived reality to be shattered, or whatever. So, it's comfortable that oh that thing is strange, or those people are strange. So, it's convenient for me to just keep them that way and not realize that they're humans just like me. I feel like everyone, maybe it's human nature, everyone needs some sort of thing to dislike. So, if I get to know a Muslim too much, I might start liking them or I might start seeing reality. Oh, I don't want to go there. I need to hate Muslims. (Najma, Individual Interview, November 2017)

We continued to discuss the scope and extent of our roles and responsibility. We did not come to a unanimous conclusion, but we agreed that the struggle was not the questions themselves, rather the time, place, and tone they were asked in. What we often experience is that the questions have a rhetorical undertone, in the sense that the person asking the question is not necessarily inclined to learn. They either use it as a method to approve their preconceived notions or to antagonize us in the process. Heba recalls an incident on campus:

Heba: *It was in the cafe in the [name of building] building. I was just at the table eating. He asked me if he can join. I said ok. It's fine. Then he said why are you wearing this [pointing to her hijab]? Is it cold? Why you don't eat pork and like this.*

Me: *Was it like he's interested?*

Heba: *No, no, no.*

Me: *So he's randomly like: why don't you eat pork?*

Heba: *Yeah, like you know, what Najma mentioned. A lot of times I notice that. So there's a lot of difference. Some people ask because they're genuinely interested. Because they're interested or they want to know. And others, they're asking questions, but they're not really asking. They're just trying to comment or trying to make you feel, you know, not so comfortable and stuff with your hijab and all that. They pose it as a question but it's not. It's not really a question. (Heba, Focus Group Discussion, October 2017)*

An added layer of complication occurs when in addition to Islam, we are expected to represent our respective countries and governments as well. I have written about this elsewhere. The following incident takes place in the emergency room of a hospital as I was being tested for fatigue and panic attack:

They take me to a room in a separate section at the back of the hospital and start doing a variety of tests on me. In the process, they ask me some basic information about myself. One of the first questions that comes up is my national background. Again, that questioning 'oh?', accompanied by another question attempting to be nice. So, one of the nurses asks me, 'How did you find the US?' Being sick I respond with a basic 'It's fine. It's been fine up to now.' But she is not actually interested in my experience in the US. So she continues,

'How does the US compare to Iran?' In my head I am thinking, 'Too vague, too broad!' Which aspects of the two countries do you want me to focus on? The culture, the art, the climate, the landscape, the religion, the political system, the educational system, the history, and the list just goes on. Not feeling well, I think of a basic response that does not require in-depth conversation and explanation. So I think of my first impression of living to the US. I tell her that I come from the capital city of Iran, a large, populated city with high rise buildings. Coming to a more rural area in the US, I found a huge contrast between the two. But of course, this is not what she is interested in about Iran. So this time she asks her question more explicitly. 'How do you find the two countries in terms of how they treat women?' This is it. This is what she has been trying to ask all throughout. Of course, she is not interested in the landscape or the culture or the history. I want to be as precise in my response, yet not naïve and uncritical. I explain, 'I haven't found a huge difference. A lot of the problems that women face throughout the world, many women in Iran go through as well. But I wouldn't say it is the norm.' Not convinced with my response she asks more detailed questions. 'Can women drive? Can women go to school? Can they choose their own husband?' I am not feeling well but above that, I am tired, I don't want to explain about these recurring questions over and over again. So, I respond with plain, yes they can drive, yes they can go to school, and yes they choose their own husband. (Karimi, 2016)

Our conversation on our respective countries became an inside joke among the three of us. We were either afraid to express our national identity due to the political vilification of our country in the media, or we did not exist on the map and no one had actually heard the name of that country. The joke became that between the option of being a violent and barbaric 'other' and not existing on the map, we would choose non-existence. The elimination of our identity seemed a more

comfortable choice in comparison to the impossible task of disrupting the constructed monster image of our countries.

There is a cyclical relation between predominant sociopolitical discourse and individual lived experiences. This interconnectivity has the potential to lift up or bear down different identities. However, the complication occurs when such discourse transpires in rules and regulations and the implementation of the law. While the recurring misinformed questions from random strangers that show little interest in learning about us is an extra burden in our daily routines, the manifestation of this attitude in law enforcement is an alarming concern. The following incident is Najma's account of reporting an incident to the police:

Najma: So, [for me] three major incidents are the big ones. Small ones happen all the time. People change their cashier line because of the line I am standing in. People have said stuff, comments in Spanish assuming that I didn't understand, bad luck I understand and I speak that too. Or people have spoken in English assuming I don't speak English and I don't know, that oppressive, suppressive, oppressed, suppressed mentality that people have. This is like catharsis for me, right?

Another major incident was, it was actually this campus building, I walked in. I was a little late for a meeting and this lady, she followed me. She was sitting in the common area downstairs and then she got up and she followed me. So, one thing I try not to do is be alone in an elevator with one other person, definitely not with one other man. This is just female safety thing. At least three people and not even alone with one female because of where I am from. So not be alone. ... She sort of, just as the elevator was closing, she sort of just darted in. Which is weird, right? So, she got up, she came in, she made sure she came in the elevator. And then, she's like, why are you wearing that? What are you

wearing? And I was like, oh, I was running late and we're in an elevator so I can't give her a long answer. So I was like there's the modesty aspect, for my religion. I started with that and it's your relationship with Allah, because a lot of people assume it's because men make us cover and all that.

But then she was like, what is this? Now, her question became serious. I was going to the second floor, the elevator reached and she put her foot in the entry way of the elevator, sort of obstructing my exit. That's when I became totally alert, you know? Your instincts go up and I was scared. I was like, so it's not just a question. She was like, no, you should not be, blah blah blah, you should not be wearing this, why are you covered this way? I'm forgetting the statement because it was last year. I'm forgetting the specifics but I reported it to the police so they did write down what I said. She said it in question form. She was like, why do you do that? That kind of question, you know? So that was the difference. I'm going to come back to the question form part because that affected the police report. I was just shaking, it's fine, I exited. And I went into the meeting room.

Me: How did you exit? Did you like, was there any physical contact? Or you just...

Najma: No, the elevator's wide enough so I just sort of scraped past. I was like, I just got to get off here. So, I was like, oh excuse me, I think I said I am late for a meeting. And then, the meeting room, we have those alarm locks on it and I was late. So I couldn't alert someone to open the door for me and she was still there. So I was just praying to God that the door is not locked. Because there was nobody else in the lobby area at that time. But thankfully it wasn't. So, I went inside and it was glass doors. I sat down, we had pizza. I took my slice of pizza, I sat down, you look around you, right? I set up my laptop and I said hi to the person next to me and so I was sitting with view of the door because that was the

last seat that was free. And I saw that lady chose to stay in the lobby, that entrance area outside the elevator and she stood outside the door of the meeting and she stared at me. She stared me down. I was scared. She stayed there for the whole hour and half. The meeting was two hours and she went for ten, I would say to fifteen minutes, in the middle. But most of that time she sat there, there were two sofas there, she sat and stared directly at me. She would not move. And I was just scared. I was like, I was actually scared. This was around the time there were some other incidents in the news happening. I was actually scared. You don't know if someone's carrying a weapon or not. You don't know if someone, I hate to say the words, but someone can shoot right through that glass. I was just terrified. I was trying to figure out, where can I go and sit, somewhere else. And I started to google safe walk. I didn't know about it, I started googling it. Is there something safety at [name of building]? And I texted my friend. So, first I texted my husband, he didn't see it. So I was like, what do I do? What do I do? Because the meeting was starting to end. And it was a very important meeting for my professor, so I couldn't alert her or anyone in there. So I was literally being followed and stalked. She stayed there for two hours. She went for those 15 minutes in the middle. And I was like, thank God, she's gone, she came back. And that's when I got worse scared. That's when I fed the number safe walk into my phone. Because, where did she go? I thought, did she go to get something? I hate to think... Or did she go to get a weapon. I don't know why, but the first thing that entered my head was, is she going to shoot me? And I am often scared of that someone could just whip their gun out and shoot you. I think it was after the Chapel Hill thing. I texted my friend because we were just talking about safety issues. She's another Muslim friend. So anyways, I texted her. What do I do? She helped talk me through. Because I was shaking and I forgot what the

meeting was about. I tried to silent call my husband, just to get his attention. He was asleep at that time. He had an exhausting night and he had taken a short nap. He did not know about anything until I got home.

And I just came out and started to make small talk, so eventually, like 5 minutes before, not even 5 minutes, because the meeting went late. Just as people started to get up from their seats, you know how they greet each other before they exit, she disappeared. I then started, ok, she's probably gone but I was scared. What if she's on the floor? What if she's downstairs? And I had come in my own car. So I was scared. What if she follows me? So I started to just make small talk. I was like, let me try to get into my senses here. I was like, do I call 911, someone's following me? For 2 hours. And she stared me down. And she'd asked those threatening questions or whatever and blocked me in the elevator. So I started to make small talk with my colleagues. And then the professor came and asked who's going to the next floor which is where our lab is. And in that, because I was just supposed to go down and go home, in that, the elevator door is open, my professor is standing in the elevator asking who's going up? And I just burst into tears. I was like, I was supposed to go here and there. I was incoherent and I burst into tears, I was shaking and trembling and all of that.

So my professor took me to the stairway and she calmed me down. She heard me out. And she's amazing. She very protective of us and she's very supportive. She was 'Actually, why didn't you tell me when I was in the meeting that this was happening to you?' I was like, it was such an important meeting for you. We had, you know, a team from outside, which had come for your project. And she was like, nothing matters beyond your safety. And this is our safe zone and all of these things. She was like, should I drive you home? I had my car,

so I was like, no I think I can go home myself. And she, because I had asked my colleague if he could walk me down to my car, just so I could make it to my car. And my professor went down with me to my car. And she was like 'Should I drive you home or should I follow you home? Are you ok to even drive? Can you drive?' I was like, I think I am going to take a few deep breaths. I was shaking and crying the whole time in my car and I kept looking behind me.

My child goes to pre-school and something had happened on campus, so I was like, is my baby ok? Sandy Hook really traumatized me. It happened right when my baby was born. Anything to do with children just traumatizes me. And then I circled to the parking lot of my son's pre-school and then I was like, oh, what if she followed? I kept looking around. I shouldn't have done that. So I went back. I was like, I just showed someone where I go. I was like, I need to check if someone followed me. It's just this paranoia you know that happens right there in the moment. So I went and everything was fine. I finally got home and my husband had just woken up and I was like I need a hug right now. And I burst into tears again and I told him everything. And then my colleague and my professor they checked up on me. They pushed me to go and report this to the police. I felt like this was a big enough incident to report. Like I said, I did not report the previous ones, the one outside the hospital or the one outside the library. And I did report it. And they, this is where I come back to the question format, the first response I got, they didn't take me seriously there. They said: 'We are in times of high tension, so you need to expect this.' That was just, I felt like I cried wolf. I'm not saying, they weren't nice to me but...

Me: You need to expect this?

Najma: *Yeah. 'We're in times of high tension now, so you need to expect these kinds of stuff. People will ask questions and you need to educate them.'* And I was like, *I spent 4 years educating or answering people's questions. I know what I'm doing, this was not that kind of question. I wrote it down on that form they make you fill. I was like, verbal assault or stalking. They were like 'It has to be consistent or repetitive for it to count as stalking.'* So I was like, *I wait for three incidents to tell you that I'm being stalked? This kind of stalking is different, right? I don't know. Maybe I'm not familiar with the legal lingo here. So I ended up feeling right there that it was a wasted visit. I just cried wolf. I made a willy-nilly out of nothing. And you know how we say a mountain out of a mole hill. I actually felt embarrassed that I went. So I don't want this to be taken that I am talking negatively about the police or something. So I was like, who do I go to then if I'm being threatened? And that caused me not to report the incident that happened after that. Because like I said, things have increased in the past two years. And I don't think I will go, I hope nothing happens to that extent, I don't think I will be able to go back and report to a police station if something happens. It was the first time I did it, hopefully it is the last time. That I don't need to ever. But I don't think I want to either, because I just felt silly there. I get it, maybe I didn't have the correct terminology that what counts as verbal assault or whatever. I get that. But I'm just telling you, I'm a student, I'm a resident here, I was scared, this is what happened to me. They were nice to me otherwise. They wrote down what I said. They just recorded it, they did nothing about it. But to hear that we're in times of high tension and that you've got to expect it and people are going to ask questions and you've got to talk to them and inform them and educate them, I know that!!! I'm a graduate student at a leading university that is highly multicultural. Come on, give me more benefit of the doubt. I'm not*

some clueless person coming from, I don't know, some village in the East or whatever stereotype people have made up.

They had actually received other reports of similar sort, we're assuming she's the same woman. The rest of the part was fine but those two sentences really clicked to me. Just the fact that why are you here? Maybe not as aggressively as that, why are you here? But you know what? This is not such big of a deal. And just to sort of validate my presence there, I asked, so at what point do we call 911? At what point do we involve the police? And then they gave me the same answer that's written in books that 'When you feel threatened, always be safe, always press the emergency button.' Well I did that now. I almost pressed an emergency button. I was looking up safe walk or whatever. And I did come to you. So, on one side you're telling us come and report everything and on the other side, you're like this wasn't that big of a deal. (Najma, Individual Interview, April 2017)

As Najma tells me about this incident, I experience a variety of emotions from anger, hopelessness, powerlessness to responsibility. What is apparent is that the centrality of Anglo-European emotions to the point that justifies harassment of the 'other'. Furthermore, Najma becomes responsible for alleviating the stress and worry of a total stranger because "*We are in times of high tension.*" Keep in mind, that this is not a stranger that is genuinely interested in finding an answer and looking to engage in a meaningful discussion. This is a stranger that allows herself to be aggressive toward Najma, with little intention of finding answers to her so-called questions.

Moreover, the fact that Najma is positioned to defend and distinguish herself from groups that are creating *tension*, first points to a deeply-rooted historical and sociopolitical racialization of Muslim identities. Secondly, by proving that she is different from 'them', she is one of the good

ones, inadvertently she is positioned to justify her identity and form of identification because in the hierarchical structuring of the world (Sayyid, 2010; Semati, 2010), people who look like Najma are not to be trusted unless proven otherwise. Third, at the intersection of her Muslimness and non-native speaker status, Najma becomes further marginalized. The police further undermined Najma's agency based on her second language status (Marginson, 2008). Her description of the scenario was dismissed based on her lack of knowledge of legal terminology. I cannot help but wonder how the police would handle the situation if some other woman had been treated the way Najma was.

Burden of Perfection

At the surface level, this burden of representation entails an undergirding assumption that there is a universal Islam and a homogeneous Muslim identity (Garner & Selod, 2014; Meer, 2013; Sayyid, 2010; Semati, 2010; Rana, 2007). At a deeper level, it also ascribes to Islam and Muslim as an identity that is constructed by and through a Western lens (Said, 1979). Further, between competing definitions of what it means to be a Muslim by a Muslim and by an Anglo-European identity, the Western conception takes center stage (Dirlik, 1994; Fanon, 1963; Gandhi, 1998; Kennedy, 1996; Said, 1979; Said 1994). Hence, as Muslims we become responsible for disrupting this imaginary. This responsibility often jeopardizes our choices as merely humans; being human is not enough, we need to be perfect. The added layer of complexity is that this has become both an external and internal expectation. Through our conversations we realize that we have internalized the predominant discourse on Muslims, to the point that we burden ourselves with the impossible task of being perfect. After all, we are playing within a pre-existing structure that often stacks the odds against us.

As we speak about the general climate and the roles of different people and institutions, Heba emphasizes our personal responsibilities:

I don't think that the campus can do anything. I think Muslim people must do it. Like, most people should try to be nice and, like, introduce themselves. Let more people learn more about Islam and they think this will educate people about Islam. To change their idea that a Muslim with a hijab is someone, you know, someone forced her to do that or she's oppressed or something like that. Especially the niqab, it's a matter of choice. The main thing is, you know, get along with people and tell them, educate them about Islam. (Heba, Focus Group Discussion, October 2017)

She continues to speak of a personal change she has committed in order to provide an alternate, positive image of Islam and Muslims:

So for me, I'm a shy person. So mostly when I talk to people, I don't have eye contact. But like I realized that when I have eye contact with them and I smile they suddenly, like, relax. When I smile, after I smile, before that they are tensioned. The second I smile, they start relaxing. So, I think smiling helps. (Heba, Focus Group Discussion, October 2017)

While Heba has a point in smiling and making eye contact, in all this, the underlying premise is that a negative image precedes us that we continually need to dismantle. As Najma pointed out in the previous section, is this a responsibility we need to carry at all times? What if we are having a tough day or a tough period at a given point of time? As humans, it is an impossible task to be at your best at all times. Furthermore, we are only human at best. This mentality denies us the basic right to make mistakes. Najma talks of this pressure:

I agree with that. Be extra nice or just what I was mentioning earlier. Sometimes it gets hard because you might be having a bad day or you might be sad or tired or stressed and

you don't have the effort in you to go that extra mile. But that could be the day you meet someone who perceives you completely differently because you're Muslim. So, if that responsibility was not just on my shoulders. And it was more like OK yes, she's Muslim but she's having a bad day or she's depressed today it's OK she didn't smile at me so that could help you. I would be more comfortable. I feel like yes, some days I'm extra cheerful and I'm bringing you dates and pastries. But another day I'm freaking out or I'm mad and I'm stressed and upset and that's not because I'm an angry Muslim woman who's in niqab. It's because I'm a person. (Najma, Focus Group Discussion, October 2017)

As previously mentioned, we did not agree on the extent of our responsibilities. However, we acknowledged the pressure, looks, and questioning that Najma experienced as a niqabi was very different from what Heba and I went through. Heba continued:

But there are some people who think: Oh, Muslims do that. Muslims act like that all the time. There are those people and you have, you know, the feeling that you're responsible and you have to watch over all your movements and every word you say. So, it's really hard. (Heba, Focus Group Discussion, October 2017)

In addition to this impossible burden of perfection, what I struggle with is this internal notion of proving ourselves to the western eye. At the heart of this aspiration, there is a hierarchical construction that requires us to prove our goodness and humanness to a certain degree. The basic attempt is to get the master's approval or become like the master (Gandhi, 1998). More so, I wonder if Heba ever asks herself where this pre-existing image comes from? Why and how has it been constructed? What are we trying to achieve in aspiring to showcase a perfect image? Najma explains that this struggle for perfection informs many of what she chooses to do or not to do:

It's one of the things, that Muslim women are oppressed and suppressed by the men and all that stuff. Like for example, we were in Wal-Mart once and I was looking at Hallmark Cards, the cards that are, like, on the lower shelf. So I was kneeling down to look at some of them. And my husband was standing and he was like stand up, get up quickly. He's like, don't kneel while I'm standing, because some people will make some wrong assumption. It's those small things because people would be like oh the Muslim wife is kneeling.
(Najma, Individual Interview, November 2017)

In addition to the internal struggle and the pressure that accompanies it, this burden has real consequences in the decisions we are positioned to make. Najma speaks of limiting her agency and compromising her health as a result of this burden:

And it's like, oh God they're going to judge me as a Muslim and not just as a person or something. And the same thing with I don't know the Doctor that visits or things like that. As a mom, for my son, only after I became more familiar in the environment I was in the hospital or whatever, where I would stand up and say things for my son. Other times I would just be like, okay I don't want to, you know, talk too much. I don't want to demand too much. I don't want to be the angry Muslim woman/mother or whatever. I mean there's always this check on our own, how we're doing things, how we're talking, everything. So the assumptions don't become verified, it's very difficult. Even when we go to the grocery store, the shopping cart or trolley, you know how you're supposed to keep yours out of the way and stuff like that. I make extra effort to make sure and I'm like, oh I'm sorry if I was in the way. And I'm apologetic and stuff because I don't want it to be like, oh yeah it's because they're Muslim or because they're international. So they don't have the manners.

So I feel like the stereotype bears heavily in our day-to-day conduct. And the way I talk, I have to add extra filters. (Najma, Individual Interview, November 2017)

While being extra cautious and always on the edge is an extra layer of pressure in our day-to-day lives, it has the potential to become a life altering issue in specific cases.

You know like, we go to pockets of Muslim communities. I feel safe, I feel alive again. Otherwise, there's days I feel like the object people have demeaned me down to. Then I jolt myself out of it. I'm like, no no no no. that's not you, you know? I'm like, no that's not me. I have to not lose myself in this sea of ignorance, hatred, and misconceptions. I like to go with the foundation of misconception because I feel I still have that hope and positivity in people. Islam teaches us benefit of the doubt. We're supposed to give someone that wrongs us, at least try to give them 70 excuses. By the time you get to 70, you're like way over it, 7 years ago. You can't even reach 70 before you're over it. So, I like to go from that pretense. And honestly, it's what helps me survive. Because if I let the fear paralyze me, then, there have been days that I have not been able to leave my house. I have literally hidden under covers. I have struggled with depression. You know, my post-partum depression. Then it prolonged. Thankfully, I am doing much better as of the past 6-8 months. But it's been a big reality. It started with the post-partum and then it got worse. All of these things affect you, you know? All feed into it. I did not take counseling initially for this reason. For the fear of being judged. I needed it desperately. Eventually when I took it and I took it from a very different route. It helped me huge, like in a big way. You know how they do an intake meeting or appointment, whatever, there's that assumption. If I'm a depressed Middle-Eastern Muslim woman who's a housewife, they think I'm coming from a background of domestic abuse. ... So like I said, that fear of judgement, that fear of

stereotypes and pre-conceived notions has paralyzed me. So, I feel like, my wings have been cut off. (Najma, Individual Interview, April 2017)

As Najma speaks of her post-partum depression and her hesitation to see a counselor, I remember the time when I was going through a divorce. I went through the same struggle of seeing a therapist here, because I was worried that I would reinforce all the stereotypes that exist about Muslim men and women. As Najma found a Muslim counselor, I also found one in Iran that despite time difference, the flakey internet connection, and other complications, we made it work. While in all these cases, we were the ones that made the decision and we need to take full responsibility for them, we were and continue to be pressured and limited by the perceptions and stereotypes that permeate the public imaginary. As individuals, we can only take responsibility for disrupting a small portion of these misconceptions. There also needs to be a conscious effort on the part of the general public and official institutions to provide a more realistic image of the Muslim population. This is not to portray a perfect image of Muslims. On the contrary, the focus should be on accepting the fact that like any other group, there are 50 shades of Muslim, that includes the good, the bad, and the ugly.

These conversations remind me of some Christian missionary groups I encounter on campus almost on a weekly basis. I remember one distinctly. A man was holding a sign with the list of people who go to hell. The list included homosexuals, fornicators, liars, abortionists, and so on. Two items on the list seized my attention, Muslims and feminists. Muslims, I could understand why, but I struggled with why feminists would go to hell. So, I decided to ask. As I engaged in a conversation with the so-called missionary, I found three interesting points. First, based on my hijab, he could not identify me as a Muslim. He had close to no basic knowledge of Islam, yet he could tell me that I would go to hell. Second, as we spoke, I found he had much more in common

with extreme Muslims rather than moderate Christians. Just as many moderate Muslims have more in common with moderate Christian compared to extreme Muslims. Third and most importantly, I envied the privilege of being a Christian in this context, where such crazy statements were made without the entirety of Christianity or all Christians being scrutinized. The privilege of living without the burden of perfection. I can only imagine how different the scenario would be if a Muslim was making these remarks.

Living in a Paradox

Similar to the notion of agency, many of our choices and experiences become a satirical irony. Ironic in the sense that public perception and dominant discourse claims one thing, while an entirely different attitude is seen in action. In the previous sections I talked about the notion of agency and Najma's experience with the police department. While the predominant rhetoric revolves around saving the Muslim woman, providing her with the agency she lacks, and giving her voice, in the police incident we witness the exact opposite. Not only Najma is not supported in the action she takes for her basic safety, rather her self-determining agency is undermined (see Marginson, 2008) due to her linguistic challenge with legal terminology. Matters and incidents like this often create a societal paradox that we as Muslim women are expected to navigate.

The Paradox of Etiquette

When it comes to social etiquette and behavior, often eastern and predominantly Muslim cultures are considered as backward, barbaric, violent, and in general lacking proper guidelines. While on the polar opposite, western and Anglo-European cultures are viewed as progressive, modern, and proper (Dirlik, 1994; Fanon, 1963; Gandhi, 1998; Kennedy, 1996; Said, 1979; Said 1994). Due to the centeredness of western culture and values this has become a widely accepted

fact. For example, Najma explains that she struggles to explain to people that based on her religious belief, she prefers not to shake hands with the opposite gender. She recalls incidents where people are offended by this behavior, considering it as improper. In addition to positioning eastern or Islamic cultures and values as inferior to western ones, what is challenging is Najma's experience of incidents that are considered inappropriate even based on western mannerisms. Individualism, privacy, personal choice, and freedom are considered as central values in western cultures (Cohn & Dirks, 1988; Bhambra, 2015); however, it is never questioned that the plethora of questions we are asked based on our personal choice of attire is a form of inappropriate public behavior. I described some of these questions in the Tension of Reality section. The absurdity becomes more apparent if these questions are reversed. If any of us as Muslim women ask a non-Muslim:

- Why are you wearing shorts?
- Why are you wearing a tank top?
- Did your father make you wear your hair in a bun?
- Does your husband make you wear a dress?

And many other questions of a similar nature.

However, as we are always positioned in the periphery, the sentiments that these questions evoke in us are rarely a matter of question. In the case of Najma and the police department, in fact, we are expected to educate people despite their aggression toward us. In addition to the constant questioning, staring, although considered inappropriate based on western values, is a common denominator in our lives to the point that we have learned to live with it. Like the questioning, the staring can also become to the point that it becomes a form of microaggression. Najma speaks of her experience in Disneyland:

That's what I meant when I said public manners, basically. There's adults pointing, that's what happened to me in Disneyland. The line was too long and it was like 15 minutes we were in the line and I was 2 months pregnant and I was only 21 and I'm a child at heart, you know. I love Disney and I was like, I want to go see the princesses. My husband needed to go in the bathroom and he was like, ok you go on and I'll join you. Those 15 minutes that I was alone, everybody's whispering among themselves. They're staring, they're pointing and like I said, I felt like I had been chewed down just standing there. It was just traumatic. I broke down, I started to cry. One good thing about the niqab is that people don't always see the tears. They don't always see my expression and stuff. So I just started to cry. I was very new here, it was my third month in the country. And I just started to cry and I was like, is this what I am going to face for the next 4 years? I was like, you know what, we came for an education. We're not here to change your lifestyle or make you like us or anything like that. We just want to coexist nicely and happily. We esteem your education in this country. (Najma, Individual Interview, April 2017)

Najma recalls countless incidents that are minor forms of inappropriate behavior. However, in addition to the Disneyland experience, she speaks of another incident that she considers as traumatic:

My first incident here, which still, I still, whenever I cross that street, I'm still traumatized. Which is very funny because it was on campus. It was in Chauncey. I was outside the library with my husband. So it's a very interesting story because that day happened to be my birthday. It was my first birthday after marriage, and I wanted to go to the library. I just want to clarify that we use the term culture shock in British terms in the sense that it's not shock as in negative, it's a different culture. So I just wanted to make sure of that. So that

was another cultural thing here for me, the libraries. I love them. I'm a book worm. We grew up crazy about reading and stuff. We don't have public libraries of this sort. If we have, they're more academic for research, non-fiction. The libraries here are amazing. I love spending time at libraries.

So he dropped me off, that was my first day at the library and I spent like five hours there. I was just in my own world. And he's like, I'll pick you up. Because we just had one car and I didn't know how to drive at that time. I was very new, like my second month here. And he got late. And this is not daylight savings time, so it gets dark earlier. He was 10 minutes late and then so they were closing the library. It was 8 pm and I didn't know what time they close the library. I was just stupid that way. But they closed the library. So I asked, I was scared to be standing out waiting in the street, calling my husband frantically. So I asked if I could stand in the vestibule to wait. I don't think they lock the outside, you can lock it from the outside and if I exit, it would, I don't know. So you lock the library door and I'm just standing in the vestibule. I was asking that. He's just coming. So back home people wait for you. And I'm sure people do that here too. Maybe that was a one off or something. But, like, people wait or they'll accommodate you. People will not leave a woman standing alone on the street back home. It just does not happen. They're there. It's this protective thing as brothers, they're like, we can't. So they locked up and everyone left. So I had no choice but to stand outside, which is fine. It was my fault that I didn't know the time that it closed. I couldn't ask them to stay, they've been working all day, all of that stuff. So I get that. And you're not obliged to stay. I'm a grown woman, you know. I was like 21, I turned 22 that day. So, the reason my husband was late was because he was

preparing a birthday surprise dinner for me at home. He was very new to cooking then, so it took him too long and he lost track of time, or whatever.

Any ways, so it was dark by then. And I just stood, I was scared to be out on the street and it was a weekend also. It was Friday. And people would pass by and I got it that they were staring at me, that was fine. And there was two guys in this black jeep or SUV, whatever. They sort of hollered at me from the car. Just like words of dislike. So, they hollered at me. I had seen them approaching. And there's a Qdoba down there. I still remember, I was calculating my steps how to get safely into Qdoba. Just because it's a restaurant. I didn't even know what Qdoba was. Just because it's a restaurant I was like, you know, I'm going to pretend I am buying something. And there's a Panda Express there, but I didn't even look there. I was just looking straight down. I was that scared. And I think part of that was that I was just troubled, in a new place. But anyways, those guys, it's the worst thing that can happen. They hollered at me and then one of them whipped out his phone and subhanAllah [Glory to God] is it's amazing how we're tuned for this or something. Reflex action clicked in me that he's going to take a picture of me. And forget about what people can do with your picture. I don't want someone taking a picture of me. Like I said, I've become so apologetic that I don't know if what I'm saying is wrong. It's just so messed up now. But I was alarmed. It was just reflex action and I turned just in time. As in I was turning and the flash was going. So I still don't know because there's a tiny delay in the flash. So I still don't know if they got a picture of me. It troubled me big time. People can do anything with your photo online, all sorts of stuff people can do now. And that just, it traumatized me big time and of course, I was shaking. I was crying and my husband came and I just burst into tears. (Najma, Individual Interview, April 2017)

In addition to violating public decency and undermining Najma's right to privacy in taking her picture without her consent, and the fear it invoked in Najma of a potential attack, I think Minh-ha best summarizes this experience. "It is as if everywhere we go, we become someone's private zoo" (Minh-ha, 1989, p. 82). This statement sums up many of the challenges that non-white, non-western women face in their attempt to explain their lived experiences in relation to the larger western and patriarchal systems of oppression. It refers to issues of tokenization, representation, stereotyping, and voice; who gets to say or do what to who? Isn't this a matter of basic human rights? Not if some women are not woman enough! Or some humans not human enough!

The Paradox of Freedom

As previously mentioned, similar to the notion of agency, many abstract conceptions such as freedom, voice, and rights, among others are defined based on Eurocentric norms. Hence, as Najma puts it:

I have had a lot, when I'm with my husband. So people almost often, if I'm with my husband and they see me covering it is flat out assumption that he has made me cover. Which of course is not the case. So, they're like, oh, you must want her to cover or you must this or you must that. (Najma, Individual Interview, November 2017)

As Najma describes the situation, two underlying assumptions inform people's perception regarding the construct of freedom as it relates to a Muslim woman's choice to cover. First, given the freedom, no woman would choose wearing the hijab or the niqab over the alternative option of not covering. The underlying premise is that wearing the hijab or niqab is inherently a form of limitation to one's freedom. Second, as a result, if a woman is covered based on Islamic guidelines, her husband, father, or brother must have made her do so. The centrality of Eurocentric norms is

prevalent to the point that it defines what freedom means, what choices people should make based on this conception of freedom, and if choosing and acting otherwise it must be due to the pressures of an external force, hence, these people deserve sympathy and saving. Najma challenges the western rhetoric of freedom and saving Muslim women by describing how such discourse has acted a force to limit her freedom:

This is not the person who I am. We were raised like this and that's a culture shock for other people. They get surprised when a woman, you know, the way I cover or the family I come from, they get surprised when I say these things. There's no surprise there, seriously. Because that is what Islam is about. I came from a family we were empowered, we were encouraged, we were told self-dignity, respect, being strong, being independent, ambitious, all of those things. People think when they go to the west, they'll get to have those free wings. My wings were cut off coming here. And that's not any hate to the place. Like I said, I love this place. This is my home. The only home I know since marriage and my home for the past five years. I don't know where life goes next. Back home was my childhood home. Here's where my baby was born. I have all this sentimental value and attachment. ... But I came here and I don't have the freedom I had back home. People think I'm suppressed and oppressed back home. I was like, no, I had more freedom back home. And this has nothing to do, before anyone misconcludes, this has nothing to do with me being a married woman. No, coming to the west has robbed me off my freedom. Coming to the west has robbed me of the self-respect I had, the self-esteem or identification that I had. Because now I feel I'm this weird person on the street. Sometimes I look at myself in the mirror wearing the niqab and stuff and I'm like, who is this? It feels like I lost my self-identity but I'm holding it on so dearly. There's days that I'm just in a daze. I'm like, who am I? because

I start seeing myself as other people see me. What is that thing going? Whereas back home, you know I used a lot of style with my abaya and stuff. I don't dress as classy, as stylish, as formal as I used to. Because that scruffiness has come in. This is not to do with being a busy mom. Just because I'm like, what is this, you know?

Again, this is not me questioning my religious devotion. No, it's like, I'm looking at it and the beauty and pride in it when I walk in society here, has been threatened while I've been here. ... Alhamdulillah [Praise be to God], I come from a healthy, happy home and the men in my life have been the source of empowerment and encouragement for me. Aside from of course, the women and my mom and all of that. You know, there's societal issues that exist everywhere. Ignorance exists everywhere. Extremism exists everywhere. Abuse exists everywhere. These things are not specific to Islam or the culture of Muslim majority countries or Muslims. So, it's just wrong to equalize those things.

So like I said, that fear of judgement, that fear of stereotypes and pre-conceived notions has paralyzed me. So I feel like, my wings have been cut off. So to take that and generalize whether based on ethnicity, or culture, or religion, or race, or gender, or whatever else, is ignorance and the extreme point of view of these people themselves who are doing it. And it's just misplaced, it's wrong. And you know, Islam has given women. Of course, I'm a Muslim speaking that, Islam has empowered women. It has dignified women, it has given women freedom. I feel free because I am a Muslim woman. And that probably translates to why coming and living for a while in the west, I feel like I'm not free any more. It's a very strange paradox because you come with a different expectation or mindset. ... That's why it helps so much when you're doing this kind of thing, that this message is transported. ... There's a lot of times that I dream of home. When I go home, I will be able to walk freely.

The way I'm dressed, the way I am. I can be proud of who I am. I'm not saying I've lost those things here, but it's a struggle. It's a constant struggle here. There's a constant fear. And this is not to hate it here. I just wish it would be so here, because I love this place too for the time here. These are memories I'd like to cherish. (Najma, Individual Interview, April 2017)

Ironically the very discourse of freedom, choice, and agency is what limits Muslim women's agency, choice, and freedom. As Najma emphasizes, living in this paradox becomes a constant struggle for self-identification, dignity, disrupting stereotypes, remaining positive, educating people, and freedom of choice based on our own terms and definitions. The struggle is multilayered. It is a constant step-by-step process of disentangling ourselves from the web of colonial rhetoric, conceptualizing our own definitions based on our value system, disrupting predominant societal discourse, educating the public about alternate ways of thinking, in this case our own, reeducating them about their prevailing prejudices, maintaining a positive attitude in the face of ignorance, and ultimately taking a small step in the right direction.

CHAPTER 6. HEBA

Being a Muslim Woman

My discussions with Heba and Najma contained many of the points mentioned in the literature on the experiences of Muslim women. We discussed the manifestations of the othering of Muslim women, the different shapes and forms they adopt, and the deep effects they have. Our discussions reminded me of the research conducted on the status of Muslim women in western societies as a whole, and on college campuses in particular. Perry (2014) explains the position of Muslim women under patriarchal and colonial regimes of thought. To her, patriarchy is a prevalent issue in many societies throughout the world and is manifested through the second-class citizenship status of women. Consequently, women experience various forms of violence and discrimination. As gender alone, regardless of race or culture, is a motive for bias and prejudice, the intersection of gender with race, class, religion, and other marginalized identities, puts minority women in an even more vulnerable position. Hence, women from diverse backgrounds experience systemic subjugation at multiple levels and in different forms.

In the case of Muslim women living in western societies, at one level, their status as women leaves them with less access to societal resources, such as healthcare, educational and financial opportunities. At another level, their national, ethnic, racial, and cultural background, along with immigrant and second language speaker status, places them at the very bottom of the constructed social hierarchy. This is not to account for their religious identity, with an outward signifier (in the case of those who wear the hijab), that further marginalizes them as *exotic* others. Whether through subtle ways of marginalization or outward acts of violence, a Muslim woman's sense of belonging

is challenged in these contexts. As she becomes targets of such treatments, she come to rethink her visibility and social activities. Just like any other victim of hostile attitudes, Muslim women are forced to rethink their place in society. Along with feelings of fear and insecurity, they are sent the message that they don't belong (Zahedi, 2011). Moreover, their sense of agency is jeopardized as they do not fit the mainstream mold of being a woman in the western societies. Based on western standards, Muslim women are viewed as lacking the ideal womanhood traits. This results in a unique positionality for Muslim women; thus, making them highly susceptible targets for prejudice, racial profiling, discrimination, and hate crimes (Mirza, 2013; Perry, 2014; Zahedi, 2011; Zimmerman, 2014). Such a disposition at the larger societal level can translate into universities by informing the lived experiences of Muslim students, particularly Muslim women. Negative attitudes on college campuses, intensified after 9/11, range from exclusion or marginalization to overt and covert forms of prejudicial and discriminatory behavior (Asmar, Proude, & Inge, 2004; Cole & Ahmadi, 2003; Peek, 2003; Seggie & Sanford, 2010; Sheridan, 2006).

According to Allen (2015), the verbal abuse of Muslim women showcases two important aspects of Islamophobic tendencies. First, that all Muslim are the same. They are all similar with little diversity in their beliefs, let alone their culture, language, ethnic, and national identity. And representing the essential 'other', they are to be disliked and hated. This is where the paradoxical combination of hypervisibility and invisibility of Muslim women comes into play. Under such conditions it is close to impossible for the presence of a Muslim woman to go unnoticed. Wherever she sets foot in, she is seen. She is seen as the universal other, who is to be feared and sympathized for simultaneously. Hence, little attention is given to her individuality and who she is (Mir, 2014;

Zahedi, 2011). She becomes an oversimplified caricature of what people see and hear in the media. Hence, her identity as a person becomes overlooked and is often invisible to people who see her.

Based on an in-depth study carried out on hijabi Muslim females in one of the big ten universities in the United States, most Muslim females attested that other students had stereotypical misconceptions about them as being exotic, fundamentalist, and oppressed, which lead to unfavorable attitudes or hurtful behavior (Cole & Ahmadi, 2003). To them the most important implication of such misconceptions was that people had already made up their mind about them before even meeting them; as a result, their reactions were often silence, questions based on these misconceptions, or merely unwillingness to engage with these students. In this context, where fear and suspicion (as opposed to intrigue), guides the interaction. Almost all the women who covered reported feeling discriminated against, marginalized and excluded from the campus community (Asmar, Proude, and Inge, 2004; Seggie & Sanford, 2010).

Most Muslims experience anti-Muslim attitude and behavior on college campuses; the level of exposure to such sentiments, however, depends on the degree to which they are identified as Muslim. More specifically, Muslim women who covered, yielded more negative feelings and attitudes from college students. Seemingly, the more these women were covered, the more negative these sentiments were. According to this study, veiling in any form was mainly associated with negative words, images, and stereotypes (Everett, Schellhaas, Earp, Ando, Memarzia, Parise, Fell, & Hewstone, 2015; Mir, 2014). Further, Muslim students who adhered to the hijab, experienced higher levels of depression and anxiety due to isolation and alienation (Gulamhussein & Eaton, 2015). The stress of acculturation and not belonging is further complicated for international Muslim women, as they have to navigate both cultural and religious differences. Like most other Muslim women, they felt isolated from their campus community. For them, this

isolation was not merely based on religious factors. For example, lack of knowledge about mainstream American culture, differing cultural backgrounds, and difficulty in speaking English as a second language also served as an impediment in forming friendships with their US peers (McDermott-Levy, 2011; Tummala-Narra, & Claudius, 2013).

Rangoonwala, Sy, and Epinoza (2011) summarize the overall status of Muslim women in universities after 9/11. The main points raised in this work are as follows:

- Hate crime against Muslims have significantly increased and Muslim women experience this climate in a harsher light due to their particular dress code.
- The heightened political climate has marginalized Muslim students, excluding them from various campus activities.
- Muslim women experience hypervisibility attached to misconceptions and stereotypes.
- Muslim students, women in particular, have become targets of prejudice and discrimination.
- It is especially hard for Muslim women to adjust to college life due to different and sometimes conflicting values.

Mir (2014) elaborates that Muslim women on college campuses feel the double pressure of fitting in and remaining faithful to their religious beliefs. In their attempt to blend in with the mainstream undergraduate culture, which revolves around partying, drinking, and dating, they mainly tend to hide, cover, or down play their Muslim identity. Beyond fitting in, this is also an attempt to be perceived as ‘normal’. Likewise, professional Muslim women are left with little option but to assimilate into mainstream society to the degree possible. To this end, they can adopt Anglo names, dress based on liberal western standards, limit their communication with the local mosque, and even convert. In this case, there does seem to be a possibility to pass (Aziz, 2015).

These examples are indicators of how discourse on Muslim women, their rights and liberty is very much entangled in the colonial belief that positions western nations superior to Muslim countries. Hence, the choice of Muslim women to adhere to their belief becomes a symbol of the backward culture of the orient. Just as in patriarchal societies women are expected to strive to attain masculine standards, in this case Muslim women's ultimate goal should be to become, or at least try to become like their western counterparts (Yegenoglu, 2003).

Heba

Heba and I met at the gym. In this case, the underrepresentation of hijabi Muslim women served as a benefit to us. We passed one another, made eye contact, exchanged some casual Islamic greeting, and started talking. In fact, our first conversation revolved around the fact that we rarely see other hijabi Muslim women at the gym. We continued with explaining our positions on the matter and the importance of representation. This brief encounter accompanied by the exchange of our numbers transpired into a friendship. This is not to say that being Muslim was enough reason for us to form and continue a friendship. That initial sense of solidarity ignited the conversation. Later, we learnt about our commonalities and built a friendship around our common interests.

Similar to Najma, Heba has a commendable academic background that has allowed her to study in a globally recognized institute. She has further had the determination and perseverance to cross national boundaries and navigate global bureaucracies to move and live in a new context. In addition to the process of crossing borders, as mentioned earlier, like all international students, she has had to overcome issues of language barrier, cultural differences, and studying in a new context. In my conversations with Heba and Najma, we acknowledge that being a Muslim woman adds an additional layer of complexity to being an international student. Despite all this, Heba and I admitted that we could not begin to imagine what it would be like to adhere to the niqab. Neither

of us had the courage to cover our faces in a context that places great value in seeing one's face. The reason I mention this, is that the exchanges we had in the course of this research, allowed us the time and opportunity to think about and listen to one another's experiences. Prior to this neither Heba, nor myself had genuinely dedicated the time to think about what it means to be a niqabi. In sharing our (Heba's and my) experiences, I hope to achieve a similar connection with our readers. A connection that allows our readers to step out of their personal experiences and view the context we live in through our lens. To understand how different identities, in this case Muslim women, navigate life in a Midwestern academe.

State of Difference

The overarching sentiment informing Heba's interaction with her context was difference. Whether through close communication or merely conducting daily routines, she was continuously reminded of her difference. As discussed previously, this is despite her conscious effort to blend in and compromise based on how others dress. When thinking about the reality of human existence, one way or another we are all different. However, the difference that overshadows Heba's interaction is not a factual difference. Blended with sociopolitical discourse, it is a perceived difference, marked by an undertone of weirdness and othering. This general presumption of difference is underscored by continuous staring. *"Every single time, every single place I would go, I would receive a lot of looks from people."* (Heba, Individual Interview, April 2017)

For Najma, this state of difference was more limiting and the consequences more serious. She described it as an impediment on her freedom:

So there's a lot of places I want to go but then I can't go. Because I will stand out or I won't blend into the crowd, so then I don't go even though I want to go there. Those similar

kinds of events back home, everyone else is like me so I'm ok to go. So, there's some carnival or whatever. Here, I have to be careful where I'm going or I have to plan, think or prepare myself or not go at all. I feel like, you know, like as I said I felt more freedom when I was back home and here I don't feel as much freedom, which it sounds crazy because people think US and freedom. But I had more freedom back home. So that's not because I am married, because I got married back there. It's just the context and country. I don't get as much freedom and comfort. I had it easier back there. (Najma, Focus Group Discussion, November 2017)

Islam as the Other

Heba believes that the underlying reason for this is the widespread misinformation about Islam and Muslims. She talks about how little people know about the basics of Islam and how information about Islam is spread based on perceptions rather than facts. For example, she speaks of the constant struggle to find a place to do her daily prayers:

Sometimes I pray in my office. But I look weird. Why I wear this? [referring to her hijab] What am I doing? [referring to praying] Some people like just stare. And I don't talk about it, even if it's a close friend like my American friend, which is very close to me. If they tried to ask me and they are interested to know, I talk to them in detail about everything. But with other people, I will not talk about like my country or my religion. I'm not afraid. It's just they think this is weird. What is she doing? So, I try to pray where there is nobody around. And I had this problem in my Master's because I didn't have an office when I was a Master's student. So, at the beginning I was going to the Islamic Center to pray. I didn't know where to pray or where's ok to pray here. People get shocked. What is she doing? Then my friend told me: 'OK. Let's pray in the library between the books.' I wish they had

a prayer room. So, I had this problem, I don't know where to pray. And I didn't want to pray somewhere where everybody could see me, like maybe I don't know, they don't like it or they get shocked. What is she doing? or whatever. So, I try to go to some corner in the library. (Heba, Individual Interview, May 2017)

While she does not view this as a threat to her identity and her practices, she explains that reactions such as staring or exclamation, push her to literally and figuratively hide those aspects of her identity that she can (e.g. praying between the bookshelves in the library). She speaks of a struggle to either hide or adapt aspects of her identity, to be accepted as normal. This discursive construction of what is considered normal, or more importantly what is abnormal, pushes Heba to the margins (Bhabha, 1984). She continues to explain that the same lack of knowledge extended to fasting, as people assumed that we do not eat anything for an entire month. Examples such as this create minor inconveniences for many of us including Heba. However, they also point to the deep exoticization (Goulet, 2011) of Islamic practices, that refraining from eating and drinking for an entire month seems a weird but viable reality.

Furthermore, in addition to the lack of knowledge, the misinformation propagated by formal and informal media, creates a sense of antagonism even in places that there is common ground among different faith groups.

Heba: I remember we were like sitting in Starbucks and a man just came and he asked about abortion in Islam. Because like they had like, you know, the area where the farmer's market is at, there was like a big sign of abortion and there was a woman wearing hijab. You could tell that she's Muslim. I don't remember what was the specific thing, but like you could tell she's Muslim and like during this day he came and he asked about abortion in Islam.

Me: *Interesting. So, you're thinking he assumed that it's something that is encouraged in Islam?*

Heba: *Yes. This is what he thought. He was surprised when we said no. Like, in Islam abortion is not allowed unless like there's a threat on the safety of the woman.*
(Heba, Individual Interview, November 2017)

Ironically, regardless of the position of Islam, it is always portrayed as the other, the polar opposite (Cobb, 2007; Hurd, 2002; Koshul, 2007). In some cases, it is considered as too traditional, too backward and in others, similar to the aforementioned scenario, it is considered as too progressive. Regardless of the actual teachings of the religion and how its adherents interpret it, they are constantly branded as different, the 'other'.

People's interactions with Najma rarely went beyond her Muslimness. Her appearance side-tracked all the other aspects of her identity. However, with Heba, conversations also occurred regarding her national identity.

Orient as the Other

I purposefully use the term orient to refer to the prevailing construction of the Middle-East as a homogeneous block. Heba speaks of this misconception regarding her country:

And you just feel some people maybe don't like you. Yeah. They look at you, I don't know, a certain way. So, they think that we are like deserts and we don't know how to drive or don't know anything. So, some people say things or think you are like lower or something. My husband actually, he goes out a lot and he talks to a lot of white Americans and different people here. So sometimes you get a conversation that. Like, we don't have a modern life. See, it's a mixture, we have everything. [Name of country] is more modern than Indiana.

So sometimes I feel they don't like me or something. But they don't do anything or act. Just the way they look. I don't know, that's what I think or what I feel. (Heba, Individual Interview, May 2017)

Heba points to different layers of construction. Firstly, she talks about the construction of the Middle-East as a homogeneous block, as a singular entity. Secondly, she speaks of the construction of the Middle-East as a backward orient, covered with deserts with no access to modern technology (e.g. cars and technology). Thirdly, she discusses the global hierarchical categorization of countries, in which the orient is positioned as inferior (Dirlik, 1994; Fanon, 1963; Gandhi, 1998; Kennedy, 1996; Said, 1979; Said 1994).

Heba's point reminds me of the several conversations I have had with different people regarding women driving in Iran. This underlying assumption presumes a singular identity for the Middle-East that since women cannot drive in Saudi Arabia, they cannot drive in Iran or any other country in the region. This construction assigns our diverse countries a singular and monolithic identity. It also equates this identity with negative images of backwardness, oppression of women, war, and violence (Gandhi, 1998; Said, 1979).

So like, there are certain people who are just ignorant. They're influenced from what they hear in the media, in the news, and what they hear from other people. So when you tell them, the first thing that pops into their mind is: 'Hey Syria. There's a war there, you know.' [name of country] is just adjacent to Syria, so they think [name of country] has war. So even that woman who had visited my country, I had to emphasize that [name of country] doesn't have anything going on right now. And we hope that nothing is going to go on there, you know. So, I had to emphasize this point, just to let her know that they don't mix stuff up, you know. Some people are ignorant and some people they are, I would say few

people know actually about the distribution of countries or maybe the culture and significance of each country. You know, they are a few people. Some people are curious to know, so they would ask questions and some people they just don't want to know. They don't want to know. (Heba, Individual Interview, April 2017)

Najma also believes this negative image of the Middle-East is due to the continuous focus on the minority of negative events that occur, while ignoring the majority of what is positive. She explains:

They tend to focus on the negative and forget the 85%, 90% good that's happening. And good that represents us. You're like focusing on that 5% negativity. We need to explain, we need to address, and we need to fix that. Don't generalize based on a specific religion or culture. Secondly, we have all the good that's happening. And I'm not saying focusing on the good, you are blind to the bad. You know what I mean. You can't just paint any community with a certain type of brush. It's like we have the African-American community here and to just paint things off based on a certain kind of race and make generalizations. You've got to balance both aspects of the picture to be able to even help or improve where there is room for improvement. (Najma, Individual Interview, April 2017)

Najma believes much of the discourse surrounding Islam/Muslims and the Middle-East is racist based on the racialization of the Muslim community (Sayyid, 2010; Semati, 2010). More so, half a century after Said (1979) conceptualizing and coining the term orientalism, the prevailing mentality continues to be the precise manifestation of orientalist discourse. As we discuss these points with Heba and Najma, we find ourselves trapped in a cycle of self-explanation and justifications occurring about Islam, our countries, our adherence to Islam, our choice of attire. Social interactions manifested in questions and remarks such as:

- Why do you cover your face?
- Why are you dressed like this?
- Isn't it hot? or Do you feel hot in that dress?
- Why is it *black*? [Referring to her abaya]
- Does your husband make you cover?
- At what age would you make your daughter cover?
- [Referring to her husband] You must want her to cover.
- Why don't you eat pork?
- You need to find Jesus. Jesus is love.

What is overlooked and undermined in questions like these, is our conscious choice and agency to follow Islam and cover. The presumption is that an external force, mainly our husbands or fathers are making us do this. Or that we have no clue what we are doing. (Mirza, 2013; Razack, 2005)

Navigating Avoidance

This misinformed and biased construction of Islam/Muslims and predominantly Muslim countries has led to a state of confusion that both Muslims and non-Muslims are positioned to navigate. This unknown alien and mythical space that is created around the categories of Muslimness and the orient, as propagated by the predominant discourse, fosters a sense of confusion, to say the least. Heba describes this state as follows:

I think people think of the hijab, I think people don't know how to act or how, they don't know what they should do since I'm wearing the hijab. Yeah. I think if people knew like it's okay. Like, it's just the hijab. It doesn't affect anything. I think it would help them to easily

approach you and talk to you. ... But like, once I go and talk to them, they feel free to talk.

(Heba, Individual Interview, September 2017)

Heba explains, in dealing with her, people often choose the easiest route, avoidance. She sees this avoidance in people communicating with her, sitting by her in the bus, or simply partnering with her in class or a workout routine.

Of course, things happen. Sometimes people like, students would be passing by in their cars and they would say a word out loud when they see us. I remember last year I was walking with my husband and one car was passing by. And one girl shouted: 'KISH!!!' We don't even know what she said. She assumed maybe we're Indian or something. ... I think twice or three times maybe in the past, they just pass by and throw out a word. But it's more of a sarcastic word and you know it's not like they're trying to hurt you, or maybe they're trying to hurt you. It's a sarcastic word. The incidents I see are more like looks. Like in the gym, we were talking last time. We have to form groups. Like, hey pick your partner or something. Now people actually know my face in most of the classes. But whenever I attend a new class and people are not that familiar with me. They would avoid being a partner with me. I don't know why but they would avoid me. (Heba, Individual Interview, April 2017)

Throughout our discussions with Heba and Najma, we have all had several incidents in which people shout out derogatory terms or as Heba puts it, sarcastic words, at us. However, I had never thought of this aggression as a form avoidance. My discussions with Heba, led us to think of it as a form of avoidance as well, aggressive avoidance. First, avoiding actual face-to-face aggression; hence, avoiding its consequences. Second, avoiding actual and meaningful conversation regarding their emotions, perceptions, and in this case prejudices.

Even if avoiding interaction with us as Muslim women does not include an aggressive undertone, it becomes a dangerous cycle, which perpetuates the predominant discourse of antagonizing Muslims. The root of this avoidance is either lack of knowledge or misconceptions. Avoiding interaction or conversation results in reinforcing the misinformation that is often propagated by formal and informal media. As these misconceptions grow, people distance themselves more and more from the Muslim community, and the cycle continues. As this sequence evolves, avoiding interaction becomes part of the problem. Furthermore, on a different level, it places an extra burden on the Muslim community to take responsibility for any interaction to occur. Consequently, the burden of responsibility falls yet again on the Muslims to initiate interaction, uneducate the prevailing misconceptions of the public, and then reeducate them.

Navigating Suspicion

When it comes to the lack of knowledge regarding Islam and Muslims (and/or the Middle-East), the underlying premise is not a neutral ground. This lack of knowledge is loaded with negative images, connotation, and misconceptions. Hence, in simple acts such as shopping or eating out, a questioning gaze with an undertone of suspicion follows us. Heba talks about an incident that occurred to her while shopping at a local mall:

Heba: So, once I was in the mall with my daughter because like most of the time I'm with my daughter. So, I was in the mall with a friend and my daughter. She was in a stroller and we entered like a shop. And I was looking at the clothes, so I left the stroller like in the front of the clothes like on the corner and I looked around and I came back to see her. Then actually the security in the mall saw me. We are in the same shop and it's like she was right there, I looked at some stuff and I checked on her. Then I came to check I didn't see the stroller. I saw the stroller at a different place with the security and he called a policeman

and he was like: 'You can't leave your daughter! You are not watching over your daughter!' I was freaking out. Yes. I think he was right. I shouldn't look at the clothes. It was two minutes he moved her and I didn't notice. Like, she had been moved. Then the police said it's ok, it's just like a warning. 'Keep your eye on your daughter.' But I feel that the security did this, I think, because I'm a Muslim. Yeah, he did this. He was so, like the policeman was nice. He was smiling. But the security man, like I don't know, had a heavy tone and he was really angry at me. Like I think it was too much.

Me: So, the security guard called the police?

Heba: I thought, even my American friend told me. He should have come by himself. Like it didn't require him to bring a policeman. Yeah. So, I don't know. I felt that the security man, it's because I'm a Muslim he actually did this. (Heba, Individual Interview, May 2017)

Heba's experience points to a deeply rooted constructed gaze. Said (1979) explained this gaze as a set of discourse and attitudes developed by the west to deal with the orient. This incident reifies the suspicious gaze the west adopts toward the orient. In this case, the security man knew well that Heba had no intention of abandoning or dismissing her child. However, he adopted a harsh and relatively extreme strategy to teach this oriental woman how to take care of her child. This scenario is also an ironic juxtaposition of how a man is teaching a woman to mother her child. It points to the patronizing attitude and unequal power dynamics between the east and the west, as well as, men and women.

In justifying her position Heba explains: *"I don't know, my country is very safe. Yeah. My country is very small and the crime, like the percentage of a crime is very low. So sometimes I don't know or think about protecting her."* (Heba, Individual Interview, May 2017) The irony is

that, despite common perception, Heba's country has such low crime rates that she tends to forget that she needs to be extra cautious in the US context.

This sense of suspicion extends to different aspects of our lives. Heba recalls various cases that point to a similar sentiment, and explains the interconnection between this sense of suspicion and finding safety in avoidance:

I think most of the times people are looking at you like you're some foreign thing standing next to them, you know. Or like if someone is with her children, she would pull her children toward her, just because she's afraid of you. But sometimes it's totally the opposite, because like when I go for a run, sometimes people will smile at me and say hey or something, but there are certain people who will just go away. They're kind of afraid of you or something, like you're a scary human being. (Heba, Individual Interview, April 2017)

On campus, this suspicion translates in questioning our credibility as students, instructors, and researchers. I remember the first day I started teaching an undergraduate course. I was excited and tried to incorporate all my enthusiasm into my tone, body gesture, and class atmosphere. "However, I was taken back by the same suspicious, questioning gaze. I convince myself that I am over reading into a simple look but I feel the obligation to convince them, to a certain degree, of my capabilities. That is what most teachers feel the urge to do at the beginning of each class. So I start talking about my background, my teaching experience. I mention that I have lived and studied in Australia, England, and even Dubai. But the gaze does not seem to diminish.

I faced a lot of resistance throughout the semester, what is perceived to be normal in this particular course. I try to convince myself that this is a common experience among all teaching assistants. In the middle of the semester I try to do an informal instructor evaluation to understand

what I can do better, how I can improve the class activities, and where my students stand in relation to me. The evals are written and anonymous. After collecting the evals, I skim through them out of curiosity and can't resist the urge to discuss them face-to-face. I open up the conversation and promise them a safe space to express their thoughts. What takes me back at first is the tone they use in expressing these thoughts. I find it very disrespectful, but I give them the benefit of the doubt. In regard to their comments, on the other hand I cannot. Their basic claim is that you don't understand our culture. Initially I had anticipated that this might happen, so I ask for discrete examples. Most of the points they bring up are related to the logistics of running the classroom which are clearly stated in the syllabus. I cannot help but think if it was a white American teacher running the classroom would they have the same reaction. After all I did not write the syllabus. It was written by the course supervisor, who coincidentally happens to be American, and the syllabus is typically the same across all sections.” (Karimi, Akiyama, & Deng, 2016)

Often times this questioning and suspicious gaze has an undertone of incompetency. As a result, burdening us with the responsibility of self-proof.

Burden of Self-Proof

While speaking to Heba and Najma, a recurring conversation occurred around self-proof. This meant proving that we thrive in both our academic and personal lives. The need for this continuous self-proof stemmed from the same suspicious gaze that transpired in questions, comments, and remarks while dealing with other people. However, this burden was not limited to us continuously proving our capabilities as individuals. It went beyond us as individuals to include our families, countries, and in certain cases Islam and the Muslim community.

Burden of Proof in the Local Community

Heba describes this extra burden as follows:

Heba: I feel like I always need to prove myself. So it takes me a lot of like more effort just to prove that. I don't want other people to expect me to do what they want me to do. I just want to do what I feel comfortable, you know. ... But still, I mean, I feel that I need to go to every single event they have. I need to prove to them that I can go, I can participate in your parties. I can participate in your events. I'm not different than you. I mean, I'm different, of course. But at the same time, I'm not from a different planet. You know? So, this makes it a little bit tough.

Me: So, in terms of proving, what you mean by proving? Just participation?

Heba: Proving to them that my identity doesn't make me a less fit person. Like, they know I'm a Muslim. They know I'm from the Middle-East which makes it, makes it like, if you tell them I'm from the Middle-East, they're like, uuuuuuh. I mean come on, it's a pretty place. Don't just be ignorant about what you see in the media. So I always feel like I have to go a little bit further, just to prove to them that I'm normal. (Heba, Individual Interview, April 2017)

Heba describes this burden as the extra effort we need to put in to prove that the basic premises of our lives are similar, or normal as she calls it. This burden is taking the extra step in everything and almost all aspects of our lives. It is that uneducating and reeducating that is a constant companion in our lives.

I always tell people that I have a black belt in kickboxing just because I don't want them to think that I'm a weak person or anything, you know. The same doctor that assumed that women in my country they don't actually pursue a Master's degree. I actually told him that

I have a black belt and he was kind of surprised. Like, oh really. I told him, yeah, I actually practiced since I was three years old. In my dad's gym. So, I like to always say this point. Because I feel that this point in particular, they always think that women are beaten up by their husbands or by any other person or whatever. I like them to know. No, we're strong. Even if any crazy person or guy tried to hit us or something, we can defend ourselves, you know. (Heba, Individual Interview, April 2017)

As Heba explains, the underlying assumption in relation to Muslim women is the premise of weakness, incapability, and even incompetence. So, any skills or credentials we possess presents itself as a surprise and is often considered as an anomaly to the rule. Heba's point reminds me of my conversation with an American lady regarding me playing volleyball, that I discussed in Chapter Two. Even after her initial shock of the fact that I played volleyball, she tried to find an explanation of how this could be possible. Her initial assumption was that I play with my brothers. Note that in this assumption me playing volleyball with other women was more farfetched than me forming a team with eleven brothers that have all accompanied me to the US. Najma speaks of a similar sentiment in people's assumption that she does not speak English. She also recalls people using derogatory terms about her in Spanish, assuming she does not speak Spanish, while she speaks five languages fluently.

While these assumptions are prevalent in the community, they have less of an impact on our livelihood. The bigger challenge is when such presuppositions translate into the academic setting.

Burden of Proof in Academia

Since we are all graduate students, academia plays an important role in our lives. It comprises a great, if not the greatest, portion of our time and daily activities. It is also considered as a prominent aspect of our identities. As most graduate students can relate, throughout our academic career, we go through various stages to prove our academic credibility and progress to the next step. We are accustomed to the continuous evaluation of our credentials. However, as Muslim women we face extra layers of: first, proving that we actually *can* go to school and study in our respective countries; second, that our credentials are as valuable and valid as anyone else'. In this regard, Heba recalls the following story:

My colleagues, they don't really ask you about your culture. So, I have, I told you this story before. There's this doctor at my department. He just assumed that because I'm Muslim that all people in my country are Muslim, and because we are Muslim, it's odd to have a woman pursuing a Master's degree. He asked me is it normal in your country that people actually are pursuing their Master's degree, women are pursuing their Master's degree? So, I told him no actually that's very normal. Like, even most of us are going out and getting our Ph.D. My country aren't only Muslims. So, there's always this pre-assumption that people have and stereotypes associated with everything, you know. So I feel like there's a lot of, there should be a lot of space or chance to get people to know more about us, about Muslims in general. Like our identity doesn't make us, doesn't limit us, from anything you know. (Heba, Individual Interview, April 2017)

This quote from Heba points to various levels of misconception regarding the Middle-East, Muslims, and Muslim women in particular. At the very basic level, it assumes a monolithic identity for the region, equating it with Islam and Muslims and vice versa (Li, 2002; Said, 1979). Further,

despite this lack of information, there is rarely a genuine interest in learning about the region with all of its historical, economic, and sociopolitical complexities and its complicated relationship with Islam. We discussed this point with Heba and Najma repeatedly, that in questions similar to this, there is little interest in actually learning about us rather than seeking to reinforce the existing misconceptions. Hence, in ascribing the Middle-East with a monolithic identity constructed by the west and for the west, the overarching assumption is backwardness, barbarity, lack of modernity and technology to name a few (Cobb, 2007; Hurd, 2002; Koshul, 2007; Said, 1979; Siad, 1994). Last, but not least, there is the worn-out assumption of an oppressed Muslim woman (Perry, 2014). Ironically, in knowing that Heba has a Master's and is pursuing a Ph.D. degree, the initial perception is that this is an odd scenario, an exception to the rule.

To provide a more contextual understanding, the setting of this research is a university known for its large number of international student population. The institution takes pride in attracting international students from around the globe and owes its success, to a great extent, to its international students. Nevertheless, Heba speaks of the undermining approach many professors had to her international degree, particularly being from the Middle-East.

Heba: I remember last year when I was applying to university, like to different programs at [name of institution], I remember that there was always this feeling that I'm not enough. For any program here. even though I really had a good C.V. Honestly like, I work hard, you know. I feel that last year it was really tough. Because I had to go and prove to every single, every single program that. I think I spoke with over 20 professors just to say I want an opportunity here. There was one doctor who was kind of welcoming to me and I actually worked with her. I remember I went to all of her meetings and I attended everything. And I even offered to help but she never gave me the opportunity to volunteer, which is

uncommon. My adviser right now she gives a lot of opportunities and volunteering opportunities to other people who want to help. But this professor said she wasn't really, just saying hey I welcome you and everything and you can attend the meetings. But whenever I asked her like I want to participate in the study, you know I can participate, I have the credentials, she would just ignore the request I sent. Then after that I applied to her program and at a certain point I felt that whenever I asked her she tried to like just ignore my question. And after one week, I got rejected from the program. So, I was shocked. I even cried a lot because I felt like she was kind of what's the word? You feel like people are not being honest to you or something. There's a word for that?

Me: Manipulated?

Heba: Not manipulated. ... I feel that she was just assuming that I'm not good, you know, for her program. She even offered like, hey you can apply for a non-degree. And after that we can see your grades. And then judge if we can let you into the program or not. I mean you have my grades. I'm not coming from a bad university. You can see what university this is. I don't think she even did that, you know. (Heba, Individual Interview, April 2017)

What bothered Heba in this scenario was the underlying assumption of her inadequacy. She had a Master's degree, ironically from an American University in her country. However, the prejudgment regarding the scope of her abilities was so strong that she was even denied the opportunity to work as a volunteer. Furthermore, despite having a Master's degree from a well-known university, the professor suggested that she applies for a non-degree program for her to prove her abilities. Najma speaks of a similar sentiment and describes the extra burden for her to prove that she belongs in academia and can navigate its realm:

Even when I first started studying, everyone used to, you know, I stepped in the classroom and everyone felt confused or even like the professor didn't know what to do. (Najma, Focus Group Discussion, October 2017)

Lost in Definition

During my conversations with Heba and Najma, it appears that as we navigate life in the US, we are continuously dealing with definitions that are widely different from our own. This is manifested through actions, expectations, conversations, and questions. I previously discussed the conflict and contradiction between the reality of our lived experiences compared to the general public perception. I also discussed how the values and definitions that people assign to Islam, being Muslim, and wearing the hijab are immensely different from our conceptualizations. This is not to claim that our experiences are universal, or our conceptualizations are monolithic. This is to provide an example of diversity within the Muslim community and challenge what is perceived to be a Muslim woman's relationship with her religion, environment, and fellow Muslims. However, what we realized was since Anglo-European definitions are centered and considered universal (Dirlik, 1994; Fanon, 1963; Gandhi, 1998; Kennedy, 1996; Said, 1979; Said 1994), we struggle with navigating those definitions, conceptualizing, and ultimately articulating our own definitions of different matters.

Definition of Acceptance

Our first light bulb moment was when we sat together to discuss our general experiences in the US. Najma opened up with:

Najma: *For me as I told you earlier, I think it was positive because I didn't face any, you know, problems. As I told you earlier also, when I go out on campus, I see some looks and some people might say something but so far, I'm good.*

Me: *OK. So, what are some of the things that you hear?*

Najma: *Something like go home or someone says a joke about my niqab saying oh ninja woman or something like that but that's ok.* (Najma, Focus Group Discussion, October 2017)

I have a lot to unpack in Najma's statement, but I choose to remain silent as I want the conversation to flow naturally. Heba follows:

Heba: *Yeah, I think it's positive. But like just one student which I don't know, he just like, I don't know, like started making fun of me like, why you wearing this? Is it cold? like that. But overall I think it's fine.*

Najma: *Yeah, a lot of times I notice that. So there's a lot of difference. Some people ask because they are genuinely interested, because they're interested or they want to know. And others, they're asking questions but they're not really asking. They're just trying to comment or trying to make you feel, you know, not so comfortable and stuff with your hijab and all that. They pose it as a question but it's not. It's not really a question.* (Heba and Najma, Focus Group Discussion, October 2017)

What is interesting to me is not the frequency and indecency of random remarks and questions, rather the fact that Heba and Najma have accepted it as part of their reality. It is eye-opening that they have internalized the idea that it is acceptable for them to be antagonized because of their belief and choice of attire.

*This reminds of an incident that happened to me one summer around sunset. The campus was almost empty and it was close to getting dark. As I was waiting in the bus stop for the bus to arrive, a truck with young men stopped at my feet and started shouting: 'F*** you!! Take that thing off! Can't you see it's hot?' I remember within the couple of seconds they were shouting and cursing at me, I was thinking what the best route of action would be for me in case they chose to attack me. However, I chose not to talk about that incident to many people. I chose to accept the situation as is and remain silent. Nevertheless, I distinctly remember the fear and the hurt. I cannot think of any circumstance that I would think this behavior is acceptable toward anyone. (Researcher Notes, October 2017)*

I think about the many incidents and cases where we have each been antagonized and treated inappropriately. They have come up in our previous interviews. So I encourage them to continue with the conversation.

Heba: Sometimes like on the bus, there is a chair next to me, it's empty. But nobody sits by me. They go to other seats even if the bus is busy. Until it gets too crowded and they have to. Then they would sit next to you.

Najma: I think the staring is something I am very used to. It happens a lot of times with staring people will comment while staring. But they won't comment at me. I mean they would whisper among each other or something. Once I was at a dollar store and there were these three college guys and they walked past and they're like whoa did you see that and then he called his friend and he's like look, look at that, look at that. Look at that thing. I was like, I'm not a thing. I'm a person. I mean they were college guys and of course they're not that mature you know to that level. But I think the staring, sometimes it can be inappropriate in public. So yes, you stare it's fine, but there's a limit to how much you

should stare when you're out in public. So that's, there's a balance, you know, that's sort of how I feel. (Najma and Heba, Focus Group Discussion, October 2017)

As I previously mentioned, in all this, what I struggled with was not the deep level of othering, the antagonization, or even the objectification. Rather, it was that despite all this, their initial response was that everything was ok, everything was fine. Theoretically, I had read scholarship on orientalism that the existence and identity of the orient is defined by the west (Said, 1979). That in the master-slave framework, similar to the east-west paradigm, the slave thrives for acceptance from the master (Gandhi, 1998). I knew that we continue to live within colonial structures and colonial frames of reference that certain voices are centered and validated while 'others' are silenced (Dirlik, 1994; Fanon, 1963; Gandhi, 1998; Kennedy, 1996; Said, 1979; Said 1994). I knew that Muslim identities were racialized as essentially inferior and inherently violent, dangerous, and untrustworthy (Garner & Selod, 2014; Meer, 2013; Sayyid, 2010; Semati, 2010; Rana, 2007). On top of all this, I was well aware that colonialism was not a one-way street and it survived on the colonization of both the colonizer and the colonized (Bhabha, 1984; Gandhi, 1998). But none of this scholarship had prepared me for this moment. To see colonization at its best, in practice. So, I asked a follow up question:

Me: So I have a question, you guys said people accept you. You used the word 'accept'.

What do you mean by they accept you?

Heba: Accept, like they don't do bad things to you.

Najma: They don't reject you. I don't know. something like that.

Heba: They don't do any good or any bad.

Najma: *They let you exist. They don't do anything bad to you. They don't verbally abuse you. I think that's some of the things. They just let me exist. I can still go to the shops. I can still go to campus or whatever.*

Me: *Ok. So that's an option? for people to verbally abuse you or attack you?*

Najma: *Of course it's not. It shouldn't be.*

Me: *The reason I ask this is that, why is the fact that they are so neutral. It's considered a positive thing. I guess that's my question. The fact that they don't attack you.*

Heba: *Maybe because what we hear like before coming to the US, it's like they hate Muslims. OK at least they're not attacking me.*

Me: *Ok. Any more comments on this?*

Heba: *But even sometimes, like, I feel like people don't want to communicate with me or like as I said, sit by me on the bus. Like, I feel this, I feel this.*

Najma: *Yeah, for example like, when you go to a restaurant or something they feel like, they won't get up and attack you maybe, of course, but they don't. They would prefer if you're not there. If that makes sense. So, they don't want to be with you or they might, at the best, they don't want you to be there.*

Heba: *Yeah, this is how I feel too.*

Me: *Ok. So would you say that this is accept or maybe not even accept?*

Heba: *This is accept for me.*

Me: *Ok. So just allowing you to exist is accept.*

Najma: *I think this is our definition of accept, what we've settled with.* (Heba and Najma, Focus Group Discussion, October 2017)

I continued to grapple with the topic. I was not and I am still not convinced. They have been verbally and in Najma's case, close to physically attacked, but since the frequency has not been to the point to deny them existence, they accept it as is. They define it as acceptance. To me they are playing in the colonial rhetoric of benevolence, in which what the west did to the east was for their own benefit (Said, 1994). Although Heba and Najma did not appreciate the way they were treated, symbolically they felt indebted to their context for mere existence. However, Heba brought up a point that challenged some of my conceptions:

So for me, I want to think positively about if someone did something bad or stared at me in a bad way. I would say it reflects him, it has nothing to do with me. So, then I would just forget about it. (Heba, Focus Group Discussion, October 2017)

I don't necessarily agree with her. We can't let things just be as they are. I personally feel sense of commitment to all the Muslim women that come here in the future. I hope to change the environment I lived in for a while for the better. But Heba also has a point, our frame of reference and attitude matters. This reminds me of a story of the prophet Najma talked about in our first interview. The people of Taif that threw stones at his feet and he was bleeding and he couldn't walk, he only said a prayer for them. Because that's, I don't need to preach religion at you but that's the epitome of our religion, good etiquette, akhlagh is the peak of Islam, right? We believe we have the best role model in our prophet. I still struggle with this topic, I see a point in both sides of the argument. It does not need to be an either/or choice. However, it got me to think, maybe I am the colonized one in how I

conceptualize the matter and the appropriate route of action. (Researcher Notes, October 2017)

Although I did not necessarily agree with the use of the term acceptance for our experiences, what I learned was that our frame of reference defined our outlook. Whether due to colonization, spiritual and character strength, or merely as a survival mechanism, Heba and Najma chose to give a positive spin to negative events.

Definition of Agency

As I wrote in my researcher's journal, my conversations with Heba and Najma created an internal struggle in me. I found myself confused in what an appropriate route of action would look like. I personally felt a sense of commitment to the place that I called home for a period of time and changing it for the better. Through this commitment, I believe we could create a more open environment for future hijabi women. This is not to say that Heba and Najma disagreed with me. During our conversations, we discussed a paradigm shift. As I emphasized our responsibility to the external environment, they brought up the importance of focusing on the internal vis-à-vis the outside world. This is how Najma thinks about the matter:

I don't respond to things because you can tell when someone is being hateful. He's shouting a remark at you, I don't even say 'Can I help you?' Because 'can I help you' is responding. If they really want to be helped or enlightened, just ask why I am dressed the way I am because you don't see many niqabis here. They would come up and talk to me and not shout at me or treat me as an object, as a threatening object. That kind of thing. Some other people I know, they'll go and respond to them. They're more local. A lot of those who do respond, they were born and raised here. So I think it's more like a local cultural thing,

they stand up for it. A lot of these friends are like ‘Why did you let that happen? Why didn’t you get back?’ I was like, dude, I was scared for my safety and you know, good on you if you defend yourself.

For me, I feel like two reasons: these kind of people, they don’t deserve that attention., if they want to shout at you and treat you with such a demeaning and hateful manner or assault you verbally or God forbid physically; and secondly, if I gave any attention, I do not want to respond in the same way they do, because then I would be going down to their level. You know prophet Muhammad (SAS) [Peace be upon Him] treated people who verbally and physically assaulted him in hate of his religion. He treated them with prayer and respect, and compassion. We’ve got so many stories. You know that lady who would throw trash at him every day, and he went and took care of her when she was ill. And when she was absent for a day he was like, why didn’t she throw trash at me? Or the people of Taif [a Town Close to Mecca] that threw stones at his feet and he was bleeding and he couldn’t walk, he only said a prayer for them. Because that’s, I don’t need to preach religion at you, but that’s the epitome of our religion, good etiquette, akhlagh [practice of virtue, morality, and ethics] is the peak of Islam, right? It’s the tolerance and the akhlagh of how we respond and our manners. And I feel like if we respond back in violence, this is not to say if someone is beating you up you let them, no. No, that’s not, God protect us. In the sense that we do not want to respond in ignorant or hateful ways. Because that’s another, best indirect way of educating people. Hopefully, knocking in their head that hey, you’ve got to be more mature than that. Like, come on! That’s what I meant when I said public manners basically. (Najma, Individual Interview, April 2017)

Najma speaks of the complexity of taking action in the face of, in this case verbal abuse. First, the notion of fear. This fear plays out at different levels in the lives of international Muslim women. At the basic level, it is the fear of attack or physical violence, or to put it simply, fear of repercussions. However, for international students, due to their complicated visa status and lack of legal support, neither from their home country, nor host country (Marginson, 2008), there is always the concern and worry that any misstep on their part has the potential to jeopardize their status in the host country and compromise their studies. Second, she points to the notion of cultural difference. She talks about her local Muslim friends that value outward action, while her home culture emphasizes patience. Although the notion of culture, whether here in the US or anywhere in the world is a spectrum and not a rigid construct, I find her point to be interesting as she points to a general frame of reference. Often eastern cultures are criticized by their western counterparts as being too feminine, too spiritual, and not aggressive enough, due to their introspective attitude as opposed to retrospective behavior (Cobb, 2007; King, 1999; Koshul, 2007; Said, 1979). Consequently, the frame of reference that Najma adopts to deal with matters of abuse is considered as lacking agency. This brings me to the third and last point. In the general definition of agency, the western framework is considered as the norm; hence, the choice not to take action or the choice to remain silent is viewed as the absence of agency, rather than a form of agency that requires great internal strength to practice.

As I continue to analyze my personal frames of reference and definitions, I reflect on our fire-side discussion. Heba talks of the importance of focusing on the positive. She believes that there are always going to be negative people and part of our responsibility is to remain positive. She explains the spiritual and psychological practices she adopts to maintain her positivity. Najma also explains that reading the Quran, listening to religious lectures, and increasing her confidence

in her faith is her means to remain strong and maintain her focus when issues arise. Although both talk about the importance of internal strength, neither denies the value of action, particularly ones aiming at raising awareness about Islam and Muslims. Najma speaks of her collaborations with the Muslim Student Association and the activities they engaged in on campus to educate the general public and students on matters pertaining to Islam and Muslim students.

My conversations with Heba and Najma have been a learning experience for me, to say the least. They were a means for me to identify my own embeddedness in colonial discourse and frames of reference. Furthermore, regarding the notion of agency, I conclude from our discussions that the practice of agency is not necessarily an outward action. It also entails the practice of internal strength. More so, in being an active agent for change, the decision does not need to be an either/or choice between binary opposites. It is rather a spectrum that includes both internal and external practices depending on the situation. And last but not least, external actions do not have priority nor preference over internal practices. As the many stories from our prophet teach us, sometimes the best action is to remain patient, show magnanimity, and change people's perceptions through your mannerism, what Islam calls *akhlagh* (practice of virtue, morality, and ethics).

Definition of Normality

Through my discussions with Heba and Najma, a recurring theme was the desire to be considered or treated as normal. Initially, in our conversations I resisted this notion, challenging them with questions such as: What is normal? Who defines normal? The postcolonial researcher in me was trying to make a point or even teach a lesson. However, in through reading and re-reading our conversations, I came to a realization. Even though they used the term 'normal' as their desired form of treatment, Heba and Najma were referring to a state of humanness, to be

considered and accepted as humans. Once I replaced the term normal with human, it all made sense.

Yesterday I saw a lot of hijabi girls, I don't know why. Like, it was the first time that I'd seen that number and I was happy. I was kind of happy because it brings me joy to see other Muslim women just going here and there. I think they go all over the place. I don't see them. ... I wonder why I don't see them in the gym or in activities or events. You know, I would like to see this more because I think this would make people recognize that we are normal people, we are like everyone else. (Heba, Individual Interview, April 2017)

So, they know you're just another person as well. Even when I first started studying everyone used to, you know. I stepped in the classroom and everyone felt confused or even like the professor didn't know what to do. But then within the first week, they're like she's just another student like us. She also got a family. She's studying, and you know we're talking about the same subject to bring that level of normalcy. ... And the same thing where I was doing my assistantship. In [name of department], there's no walls. Everything's see-through, right? So, a lot of people would step outside the lab just to stare at me. But then they started becoming used to it. And then they all got to know me. So, I think just being present and being around the helps people just be normal with you. (Najma, Focus Group Discussion, October 2017)

These quotes from Heba and Najma summarize many of the points I have discussed in this chapter and the previous one. In these chapters, I have explained how each of us is in a constant competition with an image that precedes us. We are constantly positioned to dismantle this pre-existing image and replace it with a more realistic one. This is not to mention the breaking of barriers and the effort this requires. As a result of this atmosphere, we are burdened with the

seemingly impossible tasks of representing our countries and the Muslim community. We are expected to be in teaching mode at all times, and we are burdened with the responsibility of educating the general public against the larger sociopolitical discourse that dominates public consciousness. In this environment, we are required to navigate two disparate realms. First, we are required to disrupt the subhuman image of the oriental and the Muslim community that precedes us to prove our humanness. Second, we are expected to be superhuman as we do this. This is why the need for normality was a recurring topic in our conversation. This was the need to be considered and accepted as human with all that it entails. This is to be merely viewed as a regular human with positive and negative traits, with strengths and weaknesses, with a certain degree of control over their lives, one that is capable in many regards, but also makes mistakes in the process, and much more. In Heba and Najma's words:

Heba: *We are similar. We are students who have come to study and whatever our religion or our country, we are equal. So just don't look at me as a different person or get nervous around me.*

Najma: *We are all human being at the end.*

Heba: *Yeah, we are just like anyone. I could be kind and I could be bad. There are like two options, I'm not just bad. Like anyone who you could meet.* (Heba and Najma, Focus Group Discussion, October 2017)

However, this is not to ignore our own positionality and embeddedness in colonial discourse. Colonialism is a two-way street that depends on both the colonizer and the colonized to survive (Bhabha, 1984; Gandhi, 1998). Similar to the colonizer, colonized populations are positioned to navigate the same economic, political, and cultural structures. Furthermore, as colonial frames of reference are centered, colonized populations often aspire to attain such

desirable, often impossible ideals (Gandhi, 1998; Spivak, 2006). In this case, in addition to the notion of humanity, an aspect of this desire is to be accepted based on western values, to be considered independent and liberated in western terms.

Definition of Connection

Throughout our conversations, Heba and Najma both emphasize that they do not intend to antagonize and vilify the people they come in contact with on a daily basis. In fact, they both recall many positive stories. This is not to say they do not feel or experience the manifestations of rampant Islamophobic metanarratives that dominate the public perception. It is rather a sense of understanding that in similar circumstances, we all might react similarly. However, they speak of a responsibility for both the Muslim and non-Muslim communities. As for the non-Muslim community, Heba and Najma noticed a deep difference in how we conceptualize connection. They describe the notion of connection in their home countries as a continuous form of interaction while sharing personal details about oneself. It is a form of deep inquiry into one another's lives. In their view, in their new context, there seems to be a bigger personal bubble around people. They found people to be more private, particularly about their personal lives. Heba describes this difference as follows:

Actually, I think most of the people are friendly. But I was a little bit shocked about some stuff. My dad came to visit me. We talk a lot actually. We talk with our neighbors. But here the people, I don't know, they are friendly but at the same time, they don't like, they have boundaries. They don't go up and talk to you in my neighborhood. We can't like just talk. We are more, we speak to people, like come to our home. So here I feel they have more boundary. They don't talk about themselves. So, I remember my dad starting to talk to our

neighbor and he was a very nice guy. He was very nice. My dad tried to talk to him and he felt he's so conservative. (Heba, Individual Interview, May 2017)

She continues to explain:

Everything here is different. Even the place you live in, apartments, going to supermarkets, interacting with people. Like, in my country people are, more often, they speak. People here are more like, they like to keep everything to themselves. So, you get to learn how to do this more and more. (Heba, Individual Interview, April 2017)

While there is not necessarily a precedence of one way of being over another, Heba and Najma thought this served as an impediment in relating with us as Muslim women. Heba mentioned: *"People here accept difference. But they don't know about each other."* (Heba, Focus Group Discussion, October 2017)

They ascribed this lack of knowledge to the absence of deep inquiry and enthusiasm in learning about 'others'. It is a form of acceptance that allows existence; however, it does not form a bond of connection at a more human and personal level. This is not to say that they considered the Muslim community to be ideal in this regard. In fact, Heba was very outspoken about her critique of the Muslim community:

Heba: I'm just assuming this. I'm not sure. They [the Muslim community on campus] may be active. I'm just not seeing it. But I feel like everything happens in the mosque. I don't go to the mosque just because. I don't have anything against the mosque. It's just that I prefer to pray like in private space or private area. That's only my preference. So, I feel like everything happens there or everything should happen only in the Muslim community. I don't like this even in my country. I remember in the university I was in, there were certain groups, like Muslim groups. They would do their own events and they wouldn't go engage

with the other. I feel this is a huge problem. Like, I used to volunteer in all university events. And I made a lot of connections and a lot of people actually, I know a lot of Christian people, people who are atheists that they actually know me. They, I used to write in the newspaper there, they used to read what I wrote and they loved what I wrote. So, I think there is a lot of gap from our part. I know a lot of Muslim women here like, oh I'm not going to say names, but they actually go out there and they do a lot of stuff.

Me: *Why? Why do you think that is?*

Heba: *Maybe they feel just comfortable being around each other. So, like there's always the language gap. There's always that you want to see people like you, maybe because they feel if they go around, white people or like American people wouldn't really accept them. It may not be true, you know. (Heba, Individual Interview, April 2017)*

The relationship between the two communities has become a classical example of the chicken and egg dilemma. What is apparent is the need for a deep and meaningful connection between the two. A connection that would go beyond the surface: "I accept you"- "I respect you" phenomenon with little to no knowledge about the 'other'. It would require deep inquiry and genuine interest in oneself and the 'other' to dismantle the historically constructed 'us' versus 'them' dichotomy. In addition to reflection, it also requires learning about a diverse array of topics such as history, geopolitics, and sociology, among others, to understand where dominant societal constructions, structures, and modes of thinking come from. More importantly, how these frames of reference shape our thinking about and understanding of the world and inform how we relate to ourselves and the 'other'.

CHAPTER 7. THE BEGINNING

Why Beginning?

I choose to call this concluding chapter, The Beginning, for various reasons. First, despite academia's obsession with research and publishing just for research sake, if not taken out and implemented in the real world, research alone has no particular value. In fact, it can be considered as a burden due to the time, money, and resources spent on carrying out a study. For research to encompass its true value, it needs to be viewed as a stepping stone, the first step being a learning experience that shows the way and sheds light on future steps. To me, a concluded research study is the beginning of a path. It provides deeper insight into making more informed future decisions. In this sense, my concluding thoughts are not the conclusion, in fact, they are the beginning. This brings me to my second reason for the name of this chapter. In a sense, I would like it to mirror my aspirations for the future, what the world might be. It is my way of hoping for, imagining, and calling people to action to create a more just society. In actuality, it is an invitation to start the dirty work, to step into the real world, make decisions and take stances that thrive for justice. Last, I do not have the answers and I do not claim that I do. Rather, I have questions. In exploring these questions, I have come across and created more. Through this, I am opening the ground for and inviting more questions and puzzlements.

As readers of this manuscript, you have stepped into my puzzlement, walked alongside Heba, Najma, and me, and we have learned from one another through this companionship. As we continue life, I ask you to take these questions with you and ask more. Through this and future explorations, I hope we transpire new possibilities, new imaginings, and a better future for all. This

sounds ambitious and almost impossible. To a large extent, it is. However, we will never know unless we begin. Hence, to me, this is the beginning.

Our Journey to This Point

The orientalist notion of a backward orient with barbaric practices, alien and contradictory to western values, has deep historical roots and is a long-standing tendency (Cobb, 2007; Hurd, 2002; Koshul, 2007; Said, 1979). In Anglo-European societies, it was mainly manifested in Muslim and Middle-Eastern communities living in the margins of society. They were often an ignored minority group, inferior but ignored (Afshar, 2008; Perry, 2014). The same global system that placed Anglo-European nations as superior to their eastern peers, adopted a similar approach to brown communities. This hierarchical structuring of nations, values, belief systems, and identities was colonialism's tool to conquer and subjugate (Said, 1994; Stam & Shohat, 2012). Despite the retreat of colonizers from the lands of the colonized, a similar mechanism of control persisted. Hence, this notion of an inferior and backward East in need of saving became imperialism's driving ideology and its means to implement it. It served as a medium to exert and maintain power at a national and global level (Dirlik, 1994; Fanon, 1963; Gandhi, 1998; Kennedy, 1996; Said, 1979; Said 1994).

The strategies of the game were complicated, including politics, economy, media, and any other tools that served this purpose (Connell, 2014; Rizvi, Lingard, & Lavia, 2006; Said, 1994). Nonetheless, it employed certain recurring ideologies. The positioning of nations, identities, and belief systems as center and periphery is one example. The hierarchical structuring of them is another. Categorizing groups of people into a monolithic group and essentializing them based on negative traits is another instance (Connell, 2014; Gandhi, 1998; Sayyid, 2010; Semati, 2010;

Taras, 2013). In the case of Middle-Eastern or Muslim identities, considering them as inherently backward and violent, and polar opposite to Anglo-European and Judeo-Christian values (Gandhi, 1998; Hurd, 2002; Said, 1979). However, these strategies are not new or by any means recent. As previously mentioned, they are all recurring tricks of the trade. They can be identified in the historical racism against black people. They can also be traced back to the violence against indigenous populations. They are the underpinning ideology of all the existing –isms and –phobias. In racism, skin pigmentation becomes the identifier for this divide. In sexism, gender is the basis of subjugation, and in homophobia, sexuality. In a nutshell, it is an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ mentality that entails an essential divide between ‘us’ and ‘them’, and ‘us’ is always superior and has precedence over ‘them’.

I provide this brief history of orientalism and the driving ideology behind various –isms and –phobias to discuss why and how Islamophobia was formulated as a concept. Islamophobia cannot be understood in isolation from orientalism, colonialism, and imperialism. Based on its current definition, Islamophobia is a relatively new term. It was first coined and used with its current definition by the Runnymede Trust Report, published in England in 1997 (Allen, 2010; Bleich, 2012). However, the September 11 attacks brought Islam and Muslims to the forefront of media and political discourse (Perry, 2014). Consequently, hate crimes, prejudice, and discrimination against the Muslim community grew exponentially (Cesari, 2004; Ewing, 2008). This was a defining moment in the lives of many Muslims living in the US and western countries. Until then, marginalization of, and discrimination against the Muslim community had an ethnic undertone and was more subtle in nature (Allen, 2010; Sirin & Fine, 2008). After 9/11, however, Islam and Muslims were not just alien, they were the enemy. This created a cyclical movement between the antagonization of Muslims by the media and political discourse and the public’s

aversion of anything Islamic, each fueling the other. This systemic vilification of Muslims came with its consequences. Affecting the Muslim population at various levels (Cesari, 2004; Ewing, 2008; Meer, 2013; Mirza, 2013; Rana, 2007). As a result, the term Islamophobia, its meaning, implications, and ramifications gained traction in the academic community as yet another form of xenophobia.

To understand Islamophobia with all its intricacies and complexities, we need to discuss and analyze it beyond the 9/11 attacks or the Runnymede Trust Report. Islamophobia is closely connected to the prevailing orientalist mentality that informs the public consciousness in western countries. It is directly linked to the imperialist mission in the Middle-East and is closely tied to the colonial activities in the region (Hurd, 2002; King, 1999; Said, 1979; Said, 1994). It also has deep historical roots, dating back to the early stages of Islam, as it was seen as a threat to Christianity, resulting in decades of war between the followers of both religions (Lopez, 2011; Rana, 2007). From the conception of Islam and its spread as an ideology, to the colonial interest in the Middle-East, to the orientalist construction of both the region and the religion by the west, to current political rifts between the US and many countries in the region, Islam and Muslims have always been the 'other'. The essentialized 'other' that are defined as the antithesis to the west. Note that I use Islam, Muslims, and the Middle-East interchangeably. I do so as a reference to and critique of the public's understanding of these terms. Although not all Middle-Eastern are Muslim and not all Muslims are from the Middle-East, the general misconception is that they are synonymous (Cesari, 2004; Ewing, 2008; Li, 2002). Hence, Islamophobia cannot be understood without knowledge of history and reference to orientalist sociopolitical discourse. Furthermore, it cannot be detached from the US/Europe political involvement in the Middle-East. Based on this brief overview, Islamophobia is: a) fear (or dread), directed at either Islam or Muslims; b) rejection

of Islam, Muslim groups, and Muslim individuals on the basis of prejudice and stereotypes with no factual basis; c) rejection of either Islam or Muslims that extends beyond thought processes to include concrete actions (Bleich, 2011). Bleich (2011) summarizes the above points as “indiscriminate negative attitudes or emotions directed at Islam or Muslims.” (p. 1582) To expand on this definition, Islamophobia is “indiscriminate attitudes and emotions directed at Islam and Muslims” with an air of western superiority and an undertone of a colonial urge to control and subjugate. Since Islam/Muslims and Middle-Easterners have never been equal peers, it is imperative, for their own sake, to change and adopt western values.

It is in this environment that Muslims, particularly Muslim women navigate life. I focus on Muslim women for two reasons. First, historically they have been at the center of sociopolitical discourse for various reasons. Second, those who choose to adhere to the hijab have an outward signifier of their faith, clearly professing their Muslimness. Muslim women have been the center of sociopolitical rhetoric for a multitude of reasons; even though, ironically, their voices have never been at the center of the discussion. Their voices have been pushed to the margins for others to talk about and speak for them (Mirza, 2013; Spivak, 2006). In their local communities, Muslim women navigate patriarchal constructions (McClintock, 1997; Zayzafoon, 2005). Within feminist circles, they are marginalized because the white woman’s voice, needs, and experiences are centered (Afshar, 2008; Ang, 2003; Dube, 2002; Pui-lan, 2002; Minh-ha, 1989; Mohanty, 1988; Zayzafoon, 2005). At a global scale, within colonial frames of reference, their oppression by the brown man is used as a construct and excuse in service to the imperial rule (Ho, 2007; Pui-lan, 2002; Terman, 2016). Furthermore, the hijab, as a signifier of faith, has become their sole identifier. Hence, before them as a person, their choice of their attire is seen. This positions them in a contested space as the hijab itself is an unknown, controversial terrain in the western psyche.

It is either a symbol of oppression or a sign of danger. Hence, reduced to their attire, Muslim women are viewed as an oppressed object or a dangerous subject (Afshar, 2008; Perry, 2014; Yegenoglu, 2002; Zayzafoon, 2005). Neither of which include the complexity of the hijab as a choice of attire, adherence to Islam as a belief system, and their personhood as autonomous individuals.

As a result of this simplification and reductive thinking, Muslim women face various challenges. They become the essential ‘other’, who is to be feared and disliked (Allen, 2015). Ironically, provoking sentiments of both fear and pity simultaneously. Based on this gross oversimplification, they become invisible while a constructed caricature represents them (Mir, 2014; Zahedi, 2011). This constructed image, attached to stereotypes, also makes them a susceptible target of prejudice, racial profiling, discrimination, and hate crime (Mirza, 2013; Perry, 2014; Zahedi, 2011; Zimmerman, 2014). The story is similar on college campuses where Muslim women experience discrimination, marginalization, exclusion, and isolation from the campus community (Asmar, Proude, & Inge, 2004; Seggie & Sanford, 2010). Under these circumstances, international Muslim women feel the extra pressure of speaking English as a second language, culture shock, adapting to a new environment, navigating a different educational system, loneliness, and alienation (Bonazzo & Wong, 2007; Karimi, Akiyama, & Deng, 2016; Lee & Rice, 2007; Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2008; Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010; Spencer-Rodgers & McGovern, 2002). However, despite the importance, urgency, and prevalence of Islamophobia and its implications in the lives of Muslim women, particularly on college campuses, there is no study that uses their narratives to speak about their experiences and center their voices. This is why this research transpired.

Beyond anything else, the purpose of this study is to center the voices of Muslim women. It is for them to narrate their own stories, rather than be narrated. In addition to providing a platform for their voices, I also aspire to center their experiences. What are the implications of Islamophobic discourse on the lives of these women? How does it affect their livelihood and the choices they make? The idea is to hear about them, by them, and for them. What I mean by for them, is to use their voices as they speak about their experiences to challenge the prevalent systemic ‘othering’ of Muslim women. The end goal is to challenge the metanarratives that talk about Muslims and to disrupt structures that perpetuate cycles of oppression against them. In this regard, postcolonial theory provided me with the frame of reference that I needed to think about, analyze, and articulate our thought processes.

The purpose of postcolonial theory is three-fold: first, to understand the social, historical, and political construction of power structures based on Eurocentric assumptions and categorizations, in which certain identities and ways of being are legitimized while ‘others’ are marginalized (Armitage, 2007; Childs & Williams, 1997; Gandhi, 1998; Kennedy, 1996; Rizvi et al., 2006; Said, 1994). Second, it serves a form of resistance to hegemonic domination of the west over the rest of the world (Armitage, 2007; Goulet, 2011; Prakash, 1994). And last but not least, through this sociocultural, political, and economic resistance, it aspires to reimagine Eurocentric structures and frames of reference (Kennedy, 1996; Rizvi et al., 2006). By displacing center and periphery, it aims to rattle systems of oppression and liberate subaltern groups (Childs and Williams, 1997; Dirlik, 1994; Stam and Shohat, 2012). Accordingly, based on the purpose of this research in centering the voices of Muslim women and challenging the pervasive Islamophobic grand narratives, postcolonial theory was a viable match.

In addition to the alignment of postcolonial theory with the goals of this study, it also afforded me the liberty to experiment with data collection and presentation. Since academia itself is a colonized space, it has historically marginalized certain ways of knowing. Often favoring the ‘scientific’ method over what is considered non-scientific or placing value on written word to the point of undermining oral traditions. In this structure, rationality is proposed as The Way for understanding and experiencing the world while ignoring sensuality and emotionality as valuable aspects of human existence (Connell, 2014; Gandhi, 1998). In rejecting the logico-scientific method’s monopoly on knowledge and supporting a paradigmatic shift to narrative as the mode of inquiry, postcolonial theory also aligned with my methodological approach (Bruner, 1986). In this regard, I adopted narrative inquiry, in which narrative is both the method of inquiry and the phenomenon under study (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). As a result, the stories and experiences of Heba, Najma, and myself became the means of inquiry, data for this study, as well as its findings. Moreover, in the course of our discussions throughout the research process, we allowed for an extent of vulnerability to occur. Through this, we expressed our feelings and emotions as well as recounting events, occurrences, and our thought processes (Polkinghorne, 1995). Likewise, narrative inquiry’s approach to experience as diverse, contextual, and idiosyncratic (Bowman, 2006; Bruner, 1986; Hammack, 2011) allowed for each of our diverse voices to transpire.

I adopted narrative inquiry for its use of stories as the means of communication both in the data collection process and presentation (Clandinin, 2013; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Frank, 2010). I found this a powerful and meaningful strategy for communicating with both my co-researchers and audience. Hence, the idea of a fireside chat, historically used by many minority groups as way to transfer knowledge and wisdom, emerged (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). I wanted to emulate this notion of sitting with one another and discussing sensitive and controversial topics

in an environment that allows for human connection. My intention was to distance us from a top-down model of imparting knowledge. While narrative inquiry uses the metaphor of walking alongside one another (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Frank, 2010), sitting together adopts a similar undertone of meaningful connection. Furthermore, narrative inquiry focuses on experience, emphasizing its continuity and contextuality (Bowman, 2006; Bruner, 1986; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Dewey, 1938; Hammack, 2011). It does not detach one's lived experiences from their environment, historical events, and the predominant sociopolitical discourse (Bruner, 1990; Clandinin, 2013; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Frank, 2010; Hammack, 2011; Polkinghorne, 1995). It takes a holistic view to these experiences (Bruner, 2001; Clandinin, 2013; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). This is precisely what I wanted to communicate through this study. I wanted our readers to understand how we, as hijabi and niqabi Muslim women, navigate life in an environment dense with sociopolitical discourse that antagonizes Muslims and promotes Islamophobic sentiments. I wanted them to see how the actions of very few, alongside the political abuse of these events, affect our day-to-day lives. I also wanted to take a critical look at the historical roots of such discourse while analyzing the why and how of their propagation.

Sitting with Us

Through my discussions with Heba and Najma, many cases of abuse came up. Some were more straightforward in nature, such as the derogatory terms shouted at us, dehumanizing us in using object pronouns, or insisting that we go back home. Others had a more subtle undertone, such as the constant staring or being pointed at. There were also some incidents that were close to physical abuse, such as a smoothie thrown at us, being followed for several hours, or five large men cornering Najma. We had all experienced some, if not all of the above. In many cases, we

were questioned about our faith and lives in a manner that pointed to deeply rooted Islamophobic sentiments. These questions ranged from antagonizing us because of our choice of attire to vilifying our loved ones, mainly the men in our lives. While some were genuine questions for them to learn; many, if not most, were to undermine us as human, students, and independent women with agency.

Despite the hurtful and at times dangerous undertone of these experiences, Heba and Najma have adopted a coping mechanism to survive. This is not to undermine the severity of such matters, rather it is to emphasize our strength and resilience in the face of adversity. I am not speaking of a strength that includes numbing the emotions and denotes the absence of any feeling. Throughout these experiences Heba and Najma expressed many cases of crying or allowing themselves some distance from the outside world to recuperate. In fact, during our discussions in the course of this study, we shared intimate moments of connection through tears as well as jokes and laughter. The strength that I am referring to is manifested in taking the time to reflect on where some of these behaviors stem from, forgiving people despite their wrong doing, adopting a positive attitude toward matters, responding to ignorance with kindness, taking the time to educate people about Islam and Muslims, and much more. They used such circumstances as a means for personal growth and character building. Part of this growth was forming a closer bond with their religion. Although this higher level of religiosity was not always enough to buffer the effect of discrimination they faced (Ghaffari & Ciftci, 2010). Furthermore, what became a struggle was that Islamophobic rhetoric affected every decision, every choice, and every second of their lives. It became the air that they breathed. Such deep thought processes and feelings are what I hope to elaborate and expand on.

State of Tension

The way I explain this state is like a game of tug-of-war, in which two opposing forces are pulling in opposite directions. Even if one side is not stronger and the system seems stable, nonetheless, any person in the middle would be under constant pressure. It is a feeling of being pulled in opposite directions at all times. For us, this goes beyond individual incidents and is our constant companion as we navigate our daily lives. I discuss this state in the following categories: tension of home, tension of threat, tension of reality, and tension if Islam.

The Tension of Home

As graduate students, we have chosen to live in a place far from where international bureaucracies and our passports would indicate as home. Nevertheless, we are required to live in this new place for several years to complete our degrees, sometimes close to a decade. Despite where life takes us in the future, this is our home for the time being. However, both Najma and Heba speak of openly or subtly being reminded that this is not their home, that they do not belong. The irony is that there is no outward indication that we are not US citizens. The mere fact that we are Muslim, seems enough reason to exclude us from this context.

When it comes to the Muslim population, despite their citizenship status, they are considered as an ‘other’ that does not belong to this setting (Calhoun, 1997; Chatterjee, 1986; Duara, 1996; McClintock, 1997). For Heba and Najma, this created an internal tension of belonging. On the one hand, this was their home for the time being. They wanted to enjoy it and belong. Najma speaks of the sentimental value of this context for her. This is where she started her family, had her first home as a married couple, and had her first child. However, the larger sociopolitical discourse along with the words and actions of people constantly reminded her that

this is not and cannot be her home, that she does not belong. This points to a deeply rooted colonial construct in which anything Muslim and anything western are considered as polar opposites and mutually exclusive. You can be one or the other, but not both (Bhambra, 2015; Dirlik, 1994; Garner & Selod, 2014; Said, 1979; Said, 1994). Furthermore, the continuous antagonization of Muslims positions them as the eternal 'other' from 'us' (Cesari, 2004; Ewing, 2008; Garner & Selod, 2014).

At a deeper level, it also brings up matters of national identity and national identification. The construct of nation states and the notion of citizenship are both colonial in nature (Balibar, 1996; Bhambra, 2015; Chatterjee, 1986; Cohn & Dirks, 1988; Duara, 1996; Eley & Suny, 1996; Smith, 1996). The underlying premise is that citizenship is an identifier for belonging. At the heart of this notion lies an 'us' versus 'them' mentality, in which belonging to one context means denying another as home (Duara, 1996). More so, the synonymity of citizenship and belonging are considered as eternal nature (Duara, 1996; Smith, 1996). Such conceptualizations are a legacy of the colonial period. However, they do not meet the realities of modern life, in which an increasing number of people move from one place to another because of various reasons. For example, Heba, Najma, and I had lived in various contexts in the span of our lives and we anticipated further moves in the future. In actuality, we are amongst the privileged few who move for academic and professional purposes. Nevertheless, we were denied the basic and vital feeling of establishing a home. I cannot help but wonder what this discourse of exclusion does to the less privileged Muslim population, to whom moving is not just an option but a means to survive.

The Tension of Threat

Islam and Muslims are often stereotyped as a violent ideology and threatening individuals in western consciousness (Allen, 2010; Taras, 2013). In addition to the image of an oppressed object, in more recent years Muslim women are also increasingly portrayed as dangerous subjects

(Perry, 2014; Zimmerman, 2014). Equating Muslims with terrorism in sociopolitical discourse along with the exoticization of the hijab as an unknown space, has reinforced this notion of Muslim women as potential threats (Perry, 2014; Zimmerman, 2014). What is often left out of the conversation is the extent that Muslim women are threatened in public spaces. Najma, Heba, and I recall many incidents of feeling threatened based on people's words and actions. In cases, worrying about our basic safety. This ironic juxtaposition of threatened and threatening is a reality that we navigate on a daily basis. Furthermore, at the intersection of gender, religion, and foreign status, we feel the increasing pressure of this threat. Consequently, silencing our voices and restricting our self-determining agency (see Marginson, 2008).

The Tension of Reality

In regard to the Muslim community, we are often portrayed in essentialist terms. Since Islam is viewed as a backward, despotic, and violent ideology (Allen, 2010; Cesari, 2004; Ewing, 2008; Hurd, 2002; Taras, 2013), the orient is increasingly defined in similar terms (Gandhi, 1998; Hurd, 2002; Said, 1979). Hence, both the ideology and the orient are constructed by the west and for the west (Said, 1979). Moreover, within these constructions, Muslim women are often portrayed as oppressed objects with limited agency (Abu Bakr, 2014; Afshar, 2008; Perry, 2014; Yegenoglu, 2003). While I acknowledge that many women throughout the world, including Muslim women, are and continue to be subjugated, this is not the reality for many of us. When faced with this constructed image, the initial reaction of Heba, Najma, and I was confusion, due to its disparity from our lived experiences. This created a sense of tension and urgency to explain and justify ourselves. I call this the internal struggle of the oriental, in which we are continuously explaining, proving, and justifying our realities against an obscure image historically created by and in service to the west (Karimi, 2016).

The Tension of Islam

In addition to the disparity between the reality of our lived experiences and public perception, the Islam we know and follow is vastly different from the one created and propagated in western consciousness. The Islam that we adhere to is fundamentally different if not polar opposite to the rigid, violent, and backward ideology publicized by the media. More so, the common misconception is that Islam is a monolithic ideology and our understanding of it unanimous. While Najma, Heba, and I believed Islam to be a dynamic ideology which takes form and transforms based on the history and culture of its context. We all had the understanding that our interpretations of the same matter could vary. For example, Heba and I adhered to the hijab differently from Najma who viewed covering her face as a symbol of her submission to God. Furthermore, even Heba and I did not see eye to eye on all aspects of the hijab and the culture that accompanies it.

State of Difference

This is a state marked by the eternal and essential difference between anything Muslim and anything western (Ahmed, 2007; Hurd, 2002; Lopez, 2011; Taras, 2013). It is an unbridgeable difference that overshadows interaction with the Muslim community. This general notion of difference or ‘otherness’ stems from the historical exoticization of oriental and consequently Islamic practices (Gandhi, 1998; Goulet, 2011; Lopez, 2011; Rana, 2007; Said, 1979). As the orient is constructed as an entity through which the west defines itself against or as polar opposites, therefore people or practices that seem from and of the orient are automatically ‘othered’. This also stems from the discursive construction of Anglo-European practices as the norm (King, 1999). Within this frame of reference other ways of being are considered as abnormal with an undertone

of inferiority (Dirlik, 1994; Fanon, 1963; Gandhi, 1998; Kennedy, 1996; Said, 1979; Said 1994). This literal and discursive othering of Islamic practices and Muslim identities has both literally and figuratively pushed Heba, Najma, and myself to the margins.

Islam as the Other

Heba associates such sentiments with the vast spread of misinformation about Islam. She believes that often people's knowledge about Islam is based on misconceptions propagated by the media rather than actual facts (Cesari, 2004; Ewing, 2008; Safi, 2007). Seldom do we encounter people asking about the basic tenets of Islam or its philosophical grounding (Goulet, 2011). Moreover, regardless of the actual position of Islam regarding certain matters (e.g. abortion), it is always positioned as the 'other', ironically, at times too traditional, at others too progressive.

Orient as the Other

I use the term orient to refer to the prevailing construction of the Middle-East as a homogenous block. Like Islam, the Middle-East is also viewed as a rigid, singular entity, ignoring its diverse cultures, languages, religions, and practices (Li, 2002; Said, 1979). More so, it is also viewed as a backward region lacking modernity and technological advancements. As a result, in the global hierarchical categorization of countries, the region as whole, regardless of individual countries, is positioned as inferior to Anglo-European nations (Dirlik, 1994; Fanon, 1963; Gandhi, 1998; Kennedy, 1996; Said, 1979; Said 1994). Such discourse regarding Islam, Muslims and the Middle-East is both racist and orientalist in nature (Said, 1979; Sayyid, 2010; Semati, 2010), resulting in avoiding these communities.

Navigating Avoidance

As misconceptions about Islam, Muslims and the Middle-East prevail, the general response to these communities is avoidance. At times this avoidance takes an aggressive undertone manifested in shouting derogatory terms at Heba, Najma, and me. I refer to this as aggressive avoidance because first, it is an avoidance of actual face-to-face aggression; as a result, avoiding its consequences. Second, it is an avoidance of any meaningful conversation regarding their emotions, perceptions, and prejudices.

The second form of avoidance is less aggressive in nature. Nonetheless, it is as dangerous at its core as it perpetuates the cycle of antagonizing Muslims. It feeds into the predominant societal discourse of Muslims as alien ‘others’ (Khiabany & Williamson, 2008; Perry, 2014; Said, 1979; Taras, 2013). The basis for this avoidance is either lack of knowledge or misconceptions about Muslim communities. Rather than disrupting the cycle of misinformation through genuine interaction, avoidance only perpetuates it. This adds another layer of difficulty in challenging the lingering colonial, orientalist, and racist rhetoric regarding Muslims and Muslim women (Said, 1979; Sayyid, 2010; Semati, 2010). Moreover, it places an extra burden on the Muslim community for any communication to occur. It also burdens them with the responsibility to first uneducate the public from their misconceptions, and then reeducate them.

Navigating Suspicion

Often times the discourse surrounding Islam, Muslims and the Middle-East is loaded with negative terminology, images, connotations, and sentiments. As a result, we are continuously walking under a suspicious gaze regarding our competency as both humans and academicians. This is symbolic of how the west interacts with the orient. It is a sense of worry accompanied by

suspicion of their presence and any potential interaction. Again, burdening the orient and its constituents to explain, justify, and prove themselves (Karimi, 2016).

Burden of Truth

Throughout my conversations with Heba and Najma, I come to the realization that to navigate life in the US, advertently or inadvertently, we are burdened with responsibilities far bigger than us, or any individual for that matter. As the metanarratives of this context continue to antagonize Islam, Muslims and Middle-Eastern identities, our lives have become an impossible struggle for representation and perfection. The underlying expectation is that: a) we uneducate the general public from the prevailing misconceptions constantly propagated by the media and sociopolitical discourse regarding different aspects of our identity; b) we reeducate them about “Islam” and the “Muslim community”. This is an impossible task for any individual to disrupt societal discourse that has historically been constructed and continuously spread by formal and informal media. Furthermore, such expectation entails an underlying assumption that there is “A Islam” or “A Muslim community” which we are then required to represent. It plays into the stereotypical notion of a monolithic Islam and the orientalist discourse of the Middle-East as a homogeneous block (Garner & Selod, 2014; Meer, 2013; Said, 1979; Sayyid, 2010; Semati, 2010; Rana, 2007). This is not to mention the colonial nature of this expectation. In centering Anglo-European thought processes, emotions, and perceptions (Dirlik, 1994; Fanon, 1963; Gandhi, 1998; Kennedy, 1996; Said, 1979; Said 1994), we are then required to take on the responsibility of re/educating the public consciousness. To do so, Heba, Najma, and I are burdened to represent the entirety of Islam and Muslim community and fulfill the impossible responsibility of being perfect at all times.

Burden of Representation

The matter of representation became a point of debate amongst us. We all felt the responsibility of educating other people about our realities and our understanding of Islam. However, Najma spoke of the exhaustion of being Islam 101 all the time. It was this burden of constant representation that exhausted her. Also, as mentioned above, in this centering of Anglo-European emotions, we were expected to take responsibility for their learning experience as well as our own. This reminded me of Hegel's master-slave relationship in which everything the slave does is to benefit the master (Gandhi, 1998). Our hope was for a more equal relationship in which both parties accepted responsibility for a genuine learning about Islam, Muslims, and our respective countries. I also refer to our countries, because in addition to Islam, we were also expected to represent our respective countries or even the Middle-East as a whole. Ironically, despite the construction of the Middle-East as a singular entity (Said, 1979), the image of our individual countries in the public mind were vastly different if not contradictory. For example, some of our countries were unheard of, while others were constantly vilified in the media.

While such societal expectations serve as an extra burden that bear us down in our daily lives, the more alarming issue is the transpiration of these expectation in implementing the law. Under these circumstances, Anglo-European emotions are centered to the point that justify harassment against Muslim identities. Despite being the victim of harassment, Najma is told by a police officer that such behavior is justified, and she needs to be prepared to educate people because these are times of high tension. At the intersection of her Muslimness, Middle-Eastern identity, and second language speaker status, Najma is reminded of her position in the hierarchical structuring of the world and her responsibility. She is burdened with an impossible task of representation while also denied self-determining agency (see Marginson, 2008).

Burden of Perfection

The grave task of representing a historical religion of more than fourteen hundred years and a vast array of nations, cultures, beliefs, and practices translates into a bigger burden, the burden of perfection. To uneducate and reeducate the general public of its historical and sociocultural biases and prejudices, we are required to be perfect at all times. Any act less than perfect, or in fact normal for other identities, carries the potential to reinforce and reiterate the existing stereotypes regarding the Muslim community. For example, Najma speaks of a constant negotiation when accompanied by her husband. They both worry that any act on their part might be viewed as a sign of Najma's oppression and play into the image of an oppressed Muslim woman (Perry, 2014).

My personal struggle with the notion of perfection is the internal need to prove myself to the western gaze (Gandhi, 1998; Karimi, 2016; Said, 1979). Regardless, of external feedback, we seem to have internalized a sense of inferiority that we feel the urge to justify our choices, practices, and ways of being to the western audience. This struggle to display a perfect image of ourselves is a choice we make in hopes of providing a counter narrative to the historical and sociopolitical vilification of our identities. Nevertheless, despite all our efforts, we can only disrupt a small portion of misconceptions. There needs to be a conscious effort on behalf of the general public and official institutions to provide a more realistic image of what it means to be Muslim. This is not to display a perfect image of the Muslim community, rather to portray the reality of who we are, 50 shades of Muslim, the good, the bad, and the ugly.

Burden of Self-Proof

Such burdens of representation and perfection also translate into a constant struggle for self-proof. In response to questioning looks, remarks, comments, and direct questions, this burden is to prove that we are enough. It is a struggle to prove the worth and capacity of ourselves as individuals, professional academics, as well as our families, countries, Islam, and the Muslim community.

Burden of Proof in the Local Community and in Academia

Heba describes this burden as a constant effort to prove her capabilities. It goes beyond our individual selves to include our respective countries or even Islam and the Muslim community. Heba explains that the general discourse surrounding the Muslim community and Muslim women is incompetence, weakness, backwardness, and incapability (Cobb, 2007; Hurd, 2002; Koshul, 2007; Perry, 2014; Said, 1979; Said, 1994). This is manifested in the surprised and shocked reactions when people learn that we participate in activities as normal as sports, speak multiple languages, or even pursue doctoral degrees. Consequently, we are to continuously exert ourselves in proving people otherwise.

A similar approach plays out in academia, when the first question about our academic credibility is whether we are allowed to go to school as Muslim women or if it is normal for women to pursue graduate degrees in our respective countries. It also becomes apparent as we are required to go above and beyond to prove our competence as graduate students, researchers, and instructors.

Living in a Paradox

I use the term paradox to refer to the irony we experience in relation with different people in the US context. I call this ironic as the public's perception, discourse, and claims can be vastly different, if not opposite, to their action. For example, while metanarratives of this context revolve around saving the Muslim woman, providing her with agency, and giving her a voice (Afshar, 2008; Perry, 2014), what we see in action is the opposite of such claims. Not only is general behavior contradictory to the above claims, but they rather further marginalize us, silence our voice, and undermine our agency (see Marginson, 2008).

The Paradox of Etiquette

Regarding social etiquette and behavior, again, due to the centeredness of western cultures and values, eastern ways of being are considered backward, barbaric, violent, and lacking proper guidelines. This is opposite to Anglo-European progressive, modern, and proper standards (Dirlik, 1994; Fanon, 1963; Gandhi, 1998; Kennedy, 1996; Said, 1979; Said 1994). Hypothetically, let us say we accept the centeredness and universality of western standards. Even based on western guidelines, proper etiquette is not followed in dealing with us as Muslim women. For example, individualism, privacy, personal choice, and freedom are considered as central values in western cultures (Cohn & Dirks, 1988; Bhambra, 2015). Nevertheless, we are constantly positioned to deal with behavior that are considered improper even based on western values. Such behavior ranges from asking personal questions, disregarding our personal space to continuous staring and pointing. The impropriety of these attitudes can only be understood if roles were to be reversed. If we were to continuously ask other women why they were dressed a certain way, why they chose a certain attire, or whether their husband or father forced them to dress in certain garments.

The Paradox of Freedom

Ironically, the very discourse of freedom, choice, and agency serve as an impediment to our freedom, choice, and agency as Muslim women. Both Heba and Najma believe they felt more freedom in their respective countries. As we navigate a web of stereotypes, biases, and prejudices, our daily lives become a constant struggle for choice, freedom, dignity, and self-identification in our own terms. We are continuously disentangling ourselves from this web of historical, sociocultural, and colonial rhetoric. Doing this requires an endless effort of disrupting predominant societal discourse, uneducating the public regarding their misconceptions, and educating them about alternate ways of being. Amidst all this, we are also responsible for defining and conceptualizing our own values.

Lost in Definition

The matter of definition became a prevalent topic in my discussions with Heba and Najma. We often found ourselves grappling with definitions that widely differed from our own. This is not to say that our conceptualizations of different matters are universal for the entire community. Rather it is to shed light on the diversity of how we approach our belief system and different matters in our environment. However, since Anglo-European definitions are centered and considered universal (Dirlik, 1994; Fanon, 1963; Gandhi, 1998; Kennedy, 1996; Said, 1979; Said 1994), we struggled with navigating these definitions while attempting to conceptualize and articulate our own.

Definition of Acceptance

Despite the frequency and inadequacy of the comments, remarks, questions, and behavior that both Najma and Heba had experienced in this context, their initial response was that they felt accepted. For me this was one of the greatest light bulb moments in this study. I was aware of the scholarship on orientalism in which the existence and identity of the oriental is defined by the west (Said, 1979). I knew of the master-slave relationship in which the slave thrived for the acceptance of the master (Gandhi, 1998). I was also well aware that we continue to navigate life within colonial structures and frames of reference. I knew theoretically and by experience that within these structures certain voices and identities are centered and validated while ‘others’ are marginalized and silenced (Dirlik, 1994; Fanon, 1963; Gandhi, 1998; Kennedy, 1996; Said, 1979; Said 1994). I was particularly in tune with the racialization of Muslims as inherently inferior (Garner & Selod, 2014; Meer, 2013; Sayyid, 2010; Semati, 2010; Rana, 2007). Moreover, I knew that colonization affected the frameworks of the colonized as well as the colonizer (Bhabha, 1984; Gandhi, 1998). Nevertheless, Heba and Najma’s point regarding being accepted in this context came as a shock.

Probing deeper into the matter, what Heba and Najma referred to as acceptance was mere existence. They had both experienced verbal abuse, marginalization, objectification, ‘othering’, and in the case of Najma close to physical abuse. However, the frequency and depth was not to the point that denied them existence. Moreover, having internalized colonial and oriental frames of reference, they felt indebted to this context regardless of their contributions to it. So, they called this allowance to exist, acceptance. On another note, they chose to adopt a positive outlook as a form of survival mechanism in the face of such negativity. Although I do not personally agree with their use of the term acceptance, I understand their conscious/subconscious reasons for doing so.

Definition of Agency

The notion of agency became an interesting point of conversation among us. I mainly understood agency as a form of external action. However, my discussions with Heba and Najma broadened my horizons. Heba and Najma both emphasized the importance of internal strength and character building in dealing with mistreatment. This shed light on my own colonial frames of reference. I often conceptualized agency as a form of action with external manifestations. This conceptualization is the basis on which eastern cultures are criticized by their western counterparts as too feminine, too spiritual, and not aggressive enough, due to their introspective attitude (Cobb, 2007; King, 1999; Koshul, 2007; Said, 1979). This emphasis on the external detracted from the importance of the internal. For example, in Heba and Najma's eyes, patience and silence in face verbal abuse was a form of agency. While none of us denied the importance of both attitudes, we agreed that it is not an either/or choice between binary opposites. It is rather a spectrum that includes both internal and external practices depending on the situation, in which neither has precedence over the other.

Definition of Normality

A running theme in my discussions with Heba and Najma was the desire to be viewed and considered as normal. Challenging them with questions such as: What is normal? Who is considered as normal? And who defines normal? I came to the realization that we were all weary of competing with a constructed image that preceded us. We were always in a battle with prevailing misconceptions. We needed to be in teaching mode at all times, disrupting predominant sociopolitical discourse and replacing it with a more realistic image of a Muslim woman. This required a constant representation of Islam, the entirety of the Muslim community, our respective

countries, and sometimes the Middle-East. I explain it as a struggle to replace the subhuman image of a Muslim oriental with a human one, while acting as a super human. The normality that Heba and Najma were referring to was the need to be considered and accepted as human with all its complexity, with all its strengths and weaknesses.

This is not to overlook our positionality and embeddedness in colonial discourse. We all navigate the same economic, political, and cultural structures and colonization is a two-way street (Bhabha, 1984; Gandhi, 1998). As these frameworks prevail, the colonized wishfully aspire to achieve the colonizer's ideals (Gandhi, 1998; Spivak, 2006). Accordingly, in addition to the notion of humanity, as Muslim women, another aspiration of ours was to be viewed as independent and liberated women based on western values.

Definition of Connection

As I have continuously emphasized throughout this manuscript, the intention is not to antagonize or vilify local people. Rather, the goal is to understand and learn from one another's perspectives. Heba and Najma recall many positives encounters with different people. This is not to overlook the impact of Islamophobic metanarratives on our lived experiences. The purpose is for both Muslim and non-Muslim communities to form a meaningful learning connection. However, this has been one of the challenges for all of us. In addition to all the struggles mentioned in previous sections, Heba, Najma, and I grappled with the notion of connection in our new context. We found that people maintained a bigger personal distance in their communications in comparison to people in our cultures. While neither way of being takes precedence over the other, we found this to be an impediment in relation with Muslim women. We all agreed that many people attempted to accept us Muslim women but there was never an effort to truly understand who we are, what we do, why we do it, and what we believe in. So, this acceptance remained at a surface

level of coexistence without any meaningful connection. I use the metaphor of the chicken and egg dilemma and which came first to describe this situation. Although there is a significant need for meaningful dialogue to occur, both communities seem to maintain a comfortable distance. An in-depth conversation of such sort will not be a comfortable one. It will require a critical understanding and analysis of history, sociology, and geopolitics to deconstruct predominant societal discourse, structures, and modes of thinking and replace them with more equitable ones.

Summarizing Thoughts

From the beginning Heba, Najma, and I have invited our audience to sit with us and listen as we narrate our lived experiences in the US Midwest. Our purpose has been to form a genuine connection, engage in critical dialogue, and formulate a meaningful analysis of the context we live in. Our intention has been to paint a picture of our lived experiences, our emotions, and our perspectives regarding different matters. The first step to such understanding is to acknowledge that we all live in an entangled web of colonial structures and discourse that inform our value system, our ways of being, and the choices we make. As we navigate life with a lens constructed by a colonial mentality to a large extent, we form an image of and formulate an opinion about ‘others’. In the case of Muslim identities, at the intersection of their cultural/ethnic identities and their religious beliefs, they are continuously portrayed as the backward, barbaric ‘other’ with violent and oppressive practices (Cobb, 2007; Dirlik, 1994; Fanon, 1963; Gandhi, 1998; Hurd, 2002; Kennedy, 1996; Koshul, 2007; Said, 1979; Said 1994). This image is constantly propagated by formal and informal media and reinforced by larger sociopolitical rhetoric (Cesari, 2004; Ewing, 2008; Meer, 2013; Mirza, 2013; Rana, 2007; Safi, 2007). The matter is further complicated for us as Muslim women. We are navigating colonial frameworks, patriarchal regimes, and

feminist discourse that marginalize our identities, silence our voices, and limit our agency, all at the same time (Afshar, 2008; Ho, 2007; McClintock, 1997; Pui-lan, 2002; Terman, 2016; Zayzafoon, 2005). Furthermore, we are expected to face this struggle for voice and representation with a smile on our face and a positive attitude at all times.

All of the above have created a unique challenge for us. The metanarratives of our context have created a state in which we are constantly pulled in opposite directions. In this state, we are required to disrupt an image that precedes us and replace it with a more realistic one. The image we are replacing goes beyond us as individuals and includes Islam as a whole, our respective countries, the Middle-East, and the entirety of the Muslim community. While this, in itself, is an impossible task, we need to take initiative, bridge avoidance, and form a connection with people that take little responsibility for their own learning. All this places a burden on our shoulders far beyond any individual's capacity. The burden of being perfect all the time or risking reinforcing existing stereotypes. As I have said before, it is the burden of dismantling a subhuman image of us by being superhuman. In addition to living in a state of push/pull and carrying an impossible burden, we are required to act according to values and meanings different from our own. We are to act normal and form connections based on conceptualizations that are not our own. This adds an extra layer of complexity as the very discourse of freedom and agency acts as an obstacle to our freedom and agency. Within this perpetual cycle of validating western/Anglo-European norms, we are expected to figure out our own value systems, find our continuously marginalized voices, and disrupt the historical sociopolitical attempt to vilify Muslim identities.

We do not say this as a form of complaint. In fact, we all feel a responsibility in providing a more realistic image of what it means to be a Middle-Eastern Muslim woman in today's world. Our intention is rather to form a connection. A connection that allows our audience to engage in a

meaningful conversation regarding our lived experiences. It is to present a critical portrait of the reciprocal interconnectivity between the personal and the political. We also invite our audience to walk alongside us to move beyond the surface level of experience. Our intention is to walk past superficial recounting of occurrences, to provide a genuine understanding of what it means and how it feels to navigate life as an international hijabi Muslim woman.

CHAPTER 8. FUTURE ASPIRATIONS

As I discussed in the previous chapter, I view the conclusion of this study as the beginning of actual work, in the form of actions we each need to take to create a more equitable society for all. In addition to action, I also invite my readers to allow themselves to imagine. What I mean by this is engaging in a critical reflection that allows for alternate ways of viewing the world to emerge. Although this goal seems idealistic in nature, any vision accompanied with concrete actions has the potential to become a reality. To me, the first step is to imagine a different world. The next steps would be taking concrete actions in line with this goal. These steps could transpire in both academic and non-academic settings and become a platform for change.

Limitations and Aspirations for Future Research

I use the term limitations to refer to aspects of the study that have the potential for improving or working on in future research. Initially, when I conceptualized the topic of this research, I intended to focus on hijabi Muslim women. As I was searching for co-researchers, Najma agreed to participate in the study. I believe her presence in the research process added great depth and value to our conversations. However, if I had the chance to reconceptualize the topic under study, I would do separate work for hijabi and niqabi women as each category has the potential to add great value and depth to the discussion on Muslim women.

Qualitative research does not aspire to provide data that is generalizable or applicable across the board. Moreover, narrative inquiry acknowledges the complexity and contextuality of human existence and aims to provide depth to conversations on various topics, especially those related to human experiences. The setting of this research was a small college town located in the

US Midwest, a context that is known to be predominantly white, Christian, and conservative. Moreover, the university that this study took place in is famous for its large number of international students. This has created a dynamic reciprocity between the campus community and the local community. It is important to situate our experiences and conversations within this particular context, as well as a larger sociopolitical discourse. Similar research carried out in another place is bound to generate different discussions.

I believe a topic such as Islamophobia and the impact it has in the lives of Muslim women requires a critical understanding of complicated global geopolitics, history, sociology, and more. As a result, qualitative research with a critical lens was a viable option. In this study, my main purpose was to create a meaningful and in-depth dialogue on what it means to be a hijabi and niqabi Muslim woman in a context dense with Islamophobic sentiments. I also intended to open a critical discussion on larger sociopolitical discourse, their roots, and implications. I do not claim that being a hijabi or niqabi Muslim woman in this context is similar for everyone. I rather hoped that this study sheds light on the diversity of Muslimness, regardless of what metanarratives propagate. There might be some overlap in our experiences, but each person brings a unique background and perspective to the conversation. Therefore, within the scope of qualitative research and narrative inquiry, I believe additional participants would add to the diversity and depth of our discussions.

In line with the above point, my co-researchers all had certain common characteristics. Although from different countries, we were all from the Middle-East. Moreover, we were all graduate students. I believe representation from various regions in the world, such as Asian countries or Europe would have provoked other interesting conversations on the diversity of our experiences. In addition to region, we all had skin pigmentation that is often referred to as brown.

Even though according to the US Census Bureau people from the Middle-East are identified as white, we are mainly viewed as brown rather than white. Hence, an additional layer of racial diversity had the potential to add complicated issues such as racial relations to the dialogue, particularly in the US context. For example, the experiences of black or white Muslim women would be interesting to unpack. Last, being an undergraduate student is vastly different from being a graduate student on college campuses. From dealing with a different age group and a different demographic to the amount of interaction with classmates, the undergraduate experience is different from graduate student life. Moreover, in the university that this study took place, there is large representation of international students in most graduate programs. As a result, as graduate students, most of our interactions are with other international students. Since undergraduate students are in contact with local students more than graduate students, the experiences of undergraduate hijabi Muslim women would have been a meaningful addition to this study.

The particular timing of this study in which the US political discourse blatantly antagonizes Muslim populations, the vulnerability of international students in terms of visa status, the limited, hence identifiable number of hijabi and niqabi women on campus, called for extra measures to be taken to maintain confidentiality. Furthermore, all my co-researchers insisted on remaining anonymous during the scope of this study, and in publications and presentations. In response to the significance of anonymity in this research and as an ethical commitment to my co-researchers, I created two composite characters to symbolically represent the hijabi and niqabi women in this study. I acknowledge that this symbolic representation detracted from the deeper contextualization of their stories. As the researcher in charge, I had to make this difficult decision in favor of my co-researchers. However, in better times, situating these stories within the context of each person's life would have allowed for an even deeper connection and more meaningful conversation to occur.

Although all the above points are limitations of this study, I choose to view them as inspiration for future research. Based on the current political climate and the sociocultural rhetoric of antagonizing Muslim identities, studies such as this serve as a platform to initiate dialogue on the experiences of Muslim women. They are also a means to center the voices of Muslim women and provide a counter narrative to the metanarratives propagated by formal and informal media. To continue the conversation, I believe it is important to pursue similar work in various contexts with a larger number of participants. It is also important to represent people from more backgrounds to be inclusive of the diverse voices of Muslim women. Moreover, it is of utmost importance to focus on and explore the intersectionality of different identity markers such as race, sexuality, and national origin with religion. This is of great significance because as human beings we experience life with all our complexities. We are not one-dimensional beings that navigate life with one aspect of our identity. Rather, we walk through life as complex, multi-dimensional beings at the intersection of our various identity markers.

Aspirations for University Campuses

I also hope studies such as this reach beyond the research community to policy makers and teachers. Work such as this can assist university policy makers in fostering a campus environment that is welcoming to all. Such policies can include creating safe spaces and programs that support Muslim women in finding a home within their campus community. In addition to support programs, some small alterations to existing campus facilities and programs can reach out to and create an inclusive environment for Muslim women. For example, Najma speaks of dedicating certain areas or rooms in the gym to women for all women to utilize, which also allows Muslim

women to exercise without their hijabs. This would not require great change to the existing facilities, it would rather be reappropriating existing spaces for a different use.

More importantly, there is a critical need on the part of college campuses to initiate programs and seminars that teach and discuss matters that are related to Islam and the Muslim community. Discussions of such nature benefit the campus community at various levels. At the surface level, it fosters an intercultural and interreligious dialogue among people of different faiths and backgrounds. It also lifts the burden of responsibility from the Muslim community to teach about anything Muslim. At a deeper level, critical conversations such as these can create awareness about global relations, political, and sociopolitical discourse. This in turn results in more informed citizens graduating from universities. Furthermore, the current job market requires employees to be knowledgeable about global relations and demonstrate intercultural communications skills. As a result, such programs also benefit students in succeeding in the job market.

Aspirations for Teacher Education Programs

As a teacher and teacher educator of more than ten years, I believe in the power and importance of education. I taught a Multicultural Education course and courses with a social justice orientation in the teacher education program at our university for more than five years. Even though the courses I taught were designed to tackle issues related to diversity, there was little to no mention of Islamophobia as a pervasive issue in the US context. Students completed the program with little exposure to matters related to Islam and Muslims or having heard the term Islamophobia. I also witnessed a similar trend in the scholarship related to multiculturalism. Due to the prevalence and implications of Islamophobia, it is imperative that critical discussions around the matter are added to teacher education programs, particularly Multicultural Education classes.

As another form of xenophobia, it is important that matters related to Muslim students are included in teacher training programs. Studies such as this can serve as a ground for critical dialogue on Islamophobia and shed light on what it means to be Muslim in the US context.

Moreover, discussions pertaining to diversity are often US centric in nature. While in other cases this might not be an impediment to an in-depth conversation, Islamophobia cannot be understood without contextualizing it in global relations. To analyze Islamophobia, it needs to be grounded in global politics, US/Europe relations with the Middle-East, and the history of colonialism and orientalism. As a result, I hope that this study provides an international outlook and a critical lens to analyze Islamophobia with all its depth and complexity.

Aspirations for the Local Community

Studies such as this can also be used as a source to teach about islamophobia, larger sociopolitical discourse, and the experiences of Muslim women. As previously mentioned, often times questions, remarks, comments, and points from average people are not mal-intended. Rather, they are based on lack of knowledge and ignorance. Research similar to this can be used to teach the general public about the reality of Muslim women's lived experiences. They can further create a critical discussion on the grand narratives of their contexts, where, how, and why they are propagated. They can also provide a platform for self-reflection to understand each individual's embeddedness within these frames of reference. In addition to the general public, these stories can be utilized as case studies and discussion points to educate healthcare professionals, police officers, and service personnel on how to relate to Muslim women. It also humanizes Muslim women to encourage communication, connection, and mutual learning.

Aspirations for the Global Community

The above points provide a practical plan for the campus community, teacher education departments, and the local community to deal with the issue of Islamophobia. However, I hope that the scope of this study reaches beyond practicality and implementability. My hope is for us to reimagine the global community. To imagine a world in which national boundaries are mere suggestions and people move from one place to another openly and freely. In this world, people feel at home in the place they choose to live, regardless of background. A constructed hierarchy does not overshadow people's lived experiences and interactions. Moreover, no identity, culture, or way of being takes center stage at the expense of 'others'. There is no categorization of center and periphery and there is a fluid flow between the two. Dichotomies of exclusion are replaced by spectrums of communication. No one is boxed in and defined based on preconceived notions. Everyone has the right to self-expression and self-determining agency. All voices are valid and heard. People navigate structures that support the success of everyone. In a nutshell, all nations, backgrounds, cultures, religions, and races are truly viewed and accepted as equal with equitable access to resources and opportunities. Although this seems like a wishful dream, I dare us all to dream.

Hi! Nice to meet you. I'm a girl...

Let me try that again. Hey there! Nice to meet you. I'm a Muslim...

Wait. No. That's not right...

Hi. Nice to meet you. I'm a terrorist...

I'm sorry for Boston and Brussels, for Paris and 9/11, for making you uncomfortable in an airplane. Sorry for offending your culture by covering. Sorry that my dietary restrictions are a threat to your health. Since apparently eating Halal might cause you to catch a disease. Sorry for the KKK... Oh wait. That wasn't me. Sorry that 90% of the terror attacks are from non-Muslims. Sorry for inventing the toothbrush, because who wants good breath? For the clocks and coffee beans, the camera in which you take your selfies, founding the first university, the invention of Chemistry and Algebra...

OK. I'm really sorry for that one...

Damn you Muslims!

I'm sorry to all of you. So I, the terrorist, am handing over the palette to you. Do what you please. Paint me over with a brush called discrimination, color me in with the colors called generalization, and wash me with the unbelievable concept of Islamophobia. I find it hilarious how people will tell me and assume that because I'm a Muslim, I can't speak English. And the fact that my mother wears traditional Islamic clothing because that's what liberates her, she's automatically assumed as not knowing the western tongue.

See, I find it funny that I'm called uneducated and probably had a hard time learning English, but y'all mistake the S and Z when it comes down to labeling me. I'm a Mus-lim, not a Muz-lim. My religion is Is-lam, not Iz-lam. Sorry for slamming about my Is-lam. Why is it that I'm treated like a guest in my own home? But heck, what do I know? I'm just a terrorist...

I'm sick of the backhanded comments and shocked expressions, the ignorant questions like: 'But don't you get hot in the summer?' Honey, no. I'm hot all the time! To the girl in my Economics class that told me that I have nice 'headgear', Girl, do I look like a football player? Or to my business teacher who taught us a lesson on Islamic culture and then proceeded to show us a video of the "Islamic State", showing us the beheadings and the brainwashing whilst he, himself, brainwashed a room full of 30- my classmates and peers. So let me teach you a lesson of my own. The terrorist group that justifies their indescribable actions with my religion, even though they've never read the Quran, is not religion. Religion is not culture, and sir, that over there is not my religion...

So dear Donald Trump, Dear people of the world...

I'm sorry! I'm sorry for the sufferings and the massacres, the bombings and the bloodshed, the attacks and the hurt, but don't you know I'm hurting too? Don't you know it hurts too to stand up here and say sorry for something I did not do? I am not a terrorist, 'radical Islam' is not a thing, because by saying that you're still associating the terror with me. The only gun I've ever fired are the ones with the bullets called poetry.

The only minefields I've ever created are the ones that explode with kindness and compassion. Instead of dropping bombs, I drop mics. I don't want to come across hateful

*and full of vengeance. I'm just tired of having to take the blame, tired of apologizing, and
having to defend myself when I too am a victim...*

So, let's try it again. Assalam Alaykom – Peace be upon you!

I'm a girl! I am a Muslim! My name is Zaynab, and I'm not a terrorist!

(Spoken word poetry, The Muslim Vibe, 2017)

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APPENDIX A. INITIAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- 1- Tell me a little bit about yourself. How long have you been at Purdue? What do you study?
Which country are you from?
- 2- Describe your journey since coming to the US.
- 3- How has this journey been? Why?
- 4- Any particular incidents or experiences that stick with you? Why?
- 5- How would you describe your overall experience? How do you feel about it?
- 6- If you had the chance, what aspects of this experience would you high light? Which ones would you change?
- 7- Overall, would you say you have welcomed and accepted? Why?
- 8- Do you think you fit in with the campus community?
- 9- Do you feel at home and at ease here? Why?
- 10- Do you think the national or global political rhetoric has had any effect on your personal experiences?
- 11- Do you feel comfortable expressing your identity? Why?

APPENDIX B. FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

- 1- Having talked about your individual experiences, how do you evaluate the campus climate regarding being a hijabi?
- 2- How similar or different do you think your experiences are? Why?
- 3- How has being an international student and a hijabi informed your experiences?
- 4- What have been your main struggles? And what has been your main support system?
- 5- What changes would you like to see on campus?
- 6- If you had the opportunity to get your word out to the general public, what would it be?
And how would you like to see it done?

APPENDIX C. SECOND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- 1- What are some of the points that stand out to you in our discussions so far?
- 2- What were some learning points for you in our focus group discussions?
- 3- Based on our discussions, we talked about how referral to the prophet's lifestyle guides you in dealing with negativity, do you think your spirituality/religiosity assists you in the face of negative incidents?
- 4- If something bothers you, if something hurts you, something annoys you, anything. Who is your support system? Who do you go to? Where do you go?
- 5- How does the fact that English is not your native language impact your interactions with people on and off campus?
- 6- Do you think the number of international students and diversity in your department has an effect on your lived experiences in the US?
- 7- What are some changes you would like to see regarding Muslim women either on campus or in the local community?
- 8- Any concluding thoughts? Anything you would like to add?

APPENDIX D. JOURNAL PROMPT

Please keep a journal during the period of this research writing about your memories, experiences, feelings, reflections and incidents that happen/ed since you came to the US. The passages you write can be as short or as long as you like. You can choose to write consistently or periodically as thoughts or emotions stir. They can be spontaneous expression of your emotions or a critical analysis on a certain incident. These expressions or analyses do not need to be limited to words. You can use any artistic tool to express your thoughts/feelings. These artistic tools can include but are not limited to written poetry, scribbles, drawing, word cloud or even writing a short story. Please be as detailed and as specific as you can.

Thank you!

If you would prefer prompt questions, please discuss the following questions in your journal:

- 1- What does Islam mean to you in your life?
- 2- How do you think the society views Islam?
- 3- What does hijab mean to you in your life?
- 4- How do you think the society views the hijab?
- 5- Have you ever seen Islamophobic feeds/comments/pictures on social media? If so, can you please send me the link or a snapshot?

VITA

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Her research interests include multicultural education; international education; islamophobia; postcolonial theory, particularly focusing on the experiences of women of color and international students. Nastaran's research has resulted in over 15 authored/co-authored publications in peer reviewed journals and national/international conferences. Nastaran has also served as a reviewer for the Journal of Language, Identity, and Education and the Journal on Education in Muslim Societies.