

Hijabi Muslim Women:
Resisting in Sexy and Fierce Formation
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Abstract

Muslim women who bear on the hijab are often viewed through a patriarchal binary lens: one of oppression and constrained-piety. This has led to the reduction of the Hijab, and within that, of the agent who chooses to wear it. In this paper, I argue how popular culture can be a powerful tool for Muslim women to reclaim the meaning of the Hijab. I analyze and contextualize Mona Haydar's Music Video "Wrap My Hijab" to show how she redefines the hijab to be one that is diverse and unique to the agent who bears it on. Overall, this paper will reaffirm the notion that Muslim Hijabi women are resisting the patriarchal narrative of the hijab in powerful and sexy formations.

Introduction

The *hijab*, a religious head-covering, is one way Muslim women choose to perform *ibadaah*: the complete devotion and love for the Almighty. In this paper, I will argue that popular culture can act as a powerful tool for Muslim women to reclaim the meaning of the hijab, and within that, their religious identity. Mona Haydar's music video, "Wrap My Hijab", works to disrupt patriarchal notions of the hijab as a symbol of oppression and constrained-piety. First, I will describe how the rise of Islamophobia in the West and the Wahhabi movement in Saudi Arabia have contributed to a binary narrative of the hijab as a symbol of oppression and constrained-piety, respectively. The common element among such binary narratives is patriarchy. Second, I will describe how the representation of a veiled Muslim woman on screen and the visual and auditory aesthetics of the music video work together to challenge a reductive and patriarchal narrative of the hijab. In doing so, I will show how Haydar re-claims the narrative of the hijab to be a powerful symbol of female empowerment and resistance against patriarchy.

Summary of the Music Video Hijabi

Mona Haydar is a Syrian-American rapper, poet, activist, educator, and "God-enthusiast" originally from Flint, Michigan. Her first single, "Wrap my Hijab", received over 1.5 million views on YouTube, which excludes the millions of others view generated through other various social media platforms. Haydar's music video embodies a multitude of messages that supports a universal notion of female empowerment. The message in the music video is communicated through the vantage point of Muslim women, with rap lyrics like, "covered up or not, don't ever take us for granted," referring to Islamophobes and (conservative) Muslims alike. The video's aesthetics incorporate elements of Afrofuturism, a form of art that blends science fiction and black culture. In an interview with the Huffington Post, Haydar says that she hopes the video "would inspire people and offer some levity, joy, and hope" (Herreria, 2017). The music video received mixed responses, especially from within the Muslim community that condemn Haydar for displaying her body so publicly. Islamophobes, moreover, continued to sexualize, racialize, and orientalise the actors in the comment section of the music video.

Islamophobia and the Hijab

The rise of Islamophobia in the contemporary west offers a critical discussion on Orientalism. Edward Said defines Orientalism as a discourse concerning the people of the East, particularly of Arab-Muslim subjects. Said contends that the narrative concerning Muslims is one of inferiority, established by the elevated power of the West, and in contradistinction to the superior West (Said, 1978, p. 52). Neo-Orientalism is an extension of this notion, but focuses on how a new way of describing the Orient emerged post 9/11 (Al-Zo'by, 2015, p. 224). Whereas traditional Orientalism views Muslims as lacking desirable qualities, neo-Orientalism views Muslims as inherently parasitic. Muslim individual's hostility and resentment of democratic values – such as freedom, human dignity, and security – stems from their religious, cultural,

"social, and psychological structures" (Al-Zo'By, 2015, p. 223). As such, Muslims residing in the west are viewed as a threat to liberal democracy. Islamophobes consider Muslims as either dangerous, violent, incompetent, uncontrollable, vicious, pathological, or all of the above.

Zine (2006) defines Islamophobia as the "fear or hatred of Islam and its adherents," which work to create "individual, ideological and systemic forms of oppression and discrimination" against Muslims (p. 239). The intersection of race, gender, and religion emphasizes the distinct impact Islamophobia has on different Muslim bodies. Muslim women who wear the Hijab, for example, are "disproportionately victims of hate encounters," which is further intensified towards Black Muslim bodies (as cited in Alimahomed-Wilson, 2017, p. 77). The depiction of Muslim women as "passive victims of male violence" or as subjects "for the fulfillment of male sexual fantasies" work to "ascribe sexual exoticism and powerlessness to Muslim women" (Alimahomed-Wilson, 2017, p. 77). It is evident, therefore, that the hijab has come to represent a threat to the West. As result, this has led to the framing of Muslim women as inherently parasitic and needing to be saved and liberated.

Hijab as the Epitome of Religious Piety within Islam

An Islamic anecdote concerning the hijab, as cited in Malik (2017):

A man asked a Muslim man: Why do your women cover their bodies and their hair? The Muslim man smiled and took two sweets, he opened one and kept the other closed. He threw them both on the dirty floor and then asked: If I asked you to take one of the sweets, which one would you choose? The man replied: The covered one. Then the Muslim man said: That's how we see and treat our women. (Author unknown).

The above anecdote represents the current discourse concerning the hijab, and its rendition of piety. The story aims to encourage Muslim women to bear on the hijab through an analogy that

positions a non-Hijabi woman as an unwrapped candy bar and a Hijabi woman as a wrapped candy bar. Both candy bars are thrown on the floor, where only the one that is wrapped is picked up from the floor. The story positions women who do not wear the hijab as lacking faith in their religion, and it positions women who wear the hijab as possessing religious superiority.

According to the analogy, a non-Hijabi Muslimah is dirty while a Hijabi Muslimah is pure.

Marking the hijab as a dominant indicator of a Muslim woman's spiritual faith undermines the personal connection that a non-Hijabi Muslim woman has with her Lord, while maintaining a patriarchal expectation of piety of Hijabi Muslim women.

The anecdote also reveals how the discourse of Muslim female bodies is dominated by Muslim men. The story itself depicts an exchange between two men talking about a particular aspect of a female's religious identity. One of the men in the story asks the other man about "your women," as if Muslim women are ornaments for Muslim men to possess. The response of the Muslim man also works to objectify and sexualize the female body by ascribing it to a sweet that is only worth having if it is wrapped. The story, finally, diminishes the essence of the hijab, which is to obey and worship God.

The author of this paper makes the argument that such stories are propagated by and through the doctrines of Wahhabism. Wahhabiyya is a religious movement inspired by one of Sunni Islam's four major schools of thought, Hanbali, that emerged in 18th century Saudi Arabia. The teachings of Wahhabism is "centred on the cleansing of faith from impurities and a return to authentic Islam" (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p.44, p.114). A central role in the preservation of a true Islamic nation included "the status and rights of women, their piety, and ritual practices" (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p. 44). The Saudi state enforces laws concerning female bodies with the support

of the Ulemah, religious scholars who issue fatwas or religious rulings based on scholarly consensus.

Al- Rasheed (2013) argues that an important element in the formation of fatwas is based on "drawing the boundaries between pious Saudi women and corrupt Western women," where piousness is defined in contradistinction to the latter (p. 117). For example, "wearing high heels, perfuming the body, eliminating excessive facial hair, and tattooing the skin for decoration or marking a tribal identity are all prohibited (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p. 118). The influence of Saudi Arabia on the Muslim nation is significant. The country is considered the birthplace of Islam, with over 15 million people visiting the country annually to touch The Holy Kabaa. As such, the author of this paper argues that Saudi Arabia's enormous wealth, influence, and the rise of the internet are all important factors to the spread of Wahhabi ideology in the West and throughout the Muslim world.

Auditory and Lyrical Analysis

The genre of rap in the music video works to amplify Haydar's overall message of female empowerment in regards to Muslim Hijabi women. Pinn (2017) argues that "rap music" signals "a cultural resistance" and a "continued dialogue with religious ideals and institutions" (p. 396). Using Pinn's analysis of rap music and its implications on African American identities and black religion, Haydar's music can be classified as "progressive rap:" a lyrical form that addresses the socio-political construction of visible Muslim women in the West, and a critical discussion on Muslim religiosity (2017, p. 402). Haydar's choice of rap music therefore works to strengthen Haydar's resistance against oriental and patriarchal portrayals of Muslim women's bodies.

The lyrical content of Haydar's song is directed to those who view Muslim women within a narrow and prejudiced framework, and that position Hijabi Muslim women as homogenized,

oppressed, and powerless subjects. Duits and Zoonen (2006) argue that "the headscarf is often framed as a marker of women's oppression in Islam," which inspire debates around "gender inequality" and "multiculturalism" that concerns Muslim women in the West (p. 109). Such reductive and essentialist conceptions of Muslim women result in organizations such as FEMEN establishing a need to 'liberate' Muslim women from their oppressive values and systems. This type of feminism is often practiced "without ethical boundaries," where an organization assumes "that all feminists agree with one agenda, tactics, and ideology" (Natalle, 2015, p. 382). With this conception in mind, one aspect of how Haydar's music video offers a space for resistance is that the video is produced by a Hijabi Muslim women with the purpose to empower other Hijabi Muslim women in the power that they possess through the embodiment of the Hijab.

The lyrics in Haydar's music video begins with stereotypical renderings that are constantly hurled at Muslim Hijabi women, such as:

What that hair look like

Bet that hair look nice

Don't that make you sweat?

Don't that feel too tight?

Within these comments and questions are implicit messages that exclude Muslim women from broader society and that position them as inherently foreign, especially within a western context. Haydar responds to this line of questioning, implying that perpetrators of Islamophobia are in need of education. This subverts the image of Muslim women as being deprived of formal education by re-framing it with respect to those who perpetuate Islamophobic understandings of Muslim women. Important in this analysis is the way the female actors are positioned in the music video. Haydar is shown rapping while staring directly at the camera lens, and by

extension, the cynical inquirer. The camera zooms out of a medium shot that exposes Haydar rubbing her 8-month pregnant belly, her eyes still fixated on the camera lens. Haydar's disinterested and apathetic facial expression and bodily movements show how she is bored of the Islamophobic rhetoric due to its repetitive use in the mainstream socio-political sphere. As such, Haydar rejects romanticized notions of her body, one that is inspired by her racial and religious identity as a Muslim-Syrian American. In doing so, Haydar also challenges the racial and religious identity of America as a White-Christian society.

Importantly, however, Haydar is not concerned with gaining the acceptance and approval of the hijab and of her body from others. Rather, Haydar is concerned with making her presence visible and permanently known, whether others like it or not:

All around the world

Love women every shading

Power run deep

So even if you hate it

I still wrap my hijab

Haydar's message is one of defiant resistance, where she does not plan to back down from her identity because others dislike it or because it makes others feel uncomfortable. This is further reinforced through the defiant stares and dominant body positions of the female actors in the music video, where they are seen looking down on and directly at viewers. It can be argued, furthermore, that Haydar recognizes and understands the dominant power structures that operate around her body and of the other Muslim women's bodies. Haydar recognizes that oppressive power structures "run deep" in society, which implies that they may never be torn down. The recognition and acceptance of these hegemonic power structures as forever embedded in society

show how Haydar seeks to resist while working in this space. This is further reinforced in how she says that even if others don't agree with her choice, she still plans to bear on the hijab. In doing so, Haydar assigns power to the hijab, which is manifested when worn by Muslim women. Haydar highlights how Muslim women can resist by calling on her Muslim Hijabi sisters to "keep swaggin" (Haydar, 2016).

More implicitly, the auditory aspect of Haydar's music video challenges notions of female piety within Islam. According to al-Kanadi (n.d), the dominant consensus is that musical instruments of all kinds are forbidden in Islam (p. 45). The argument for the prohibition of music and instrumentals is that it can lead Muslims astray, and encourage sinful activity. Listening to the female voice, moreover, is forbidden for Muslim men even in circumstances where a woman is reciting the Quran. The argument is that "the nature of a woman's (singing) voice is to excite sexual feeling in the male listener" (al-Kanadi, n.d., p. 47). In an interview, Mona Haydar recognizes the Islamic view of music, but says that she sees music differently, calling it "resistance music" (Wazwaz, 2017). Haydar goes on to say:

"You know, I'm not a young person. I'm not this thoughtless person who's just jumping into something. Music being forbidden, I'm not interested in this conversation. Because something that promotes love and light is positive and is permissible. And not only permissible but necessary, especially in the world we live in right now" (Wazwaz, 2017).

As such, Haydar's engagement with music as well as the sound of her voice in the music video work to disrupt traditional notions of what it means to be a pious and modest Muslim woman. Haydar's framing of music as an act of resistance, furthermore, raises questions in the way religious rulings are formulated in their purpose and intention. They reveal, specifically, the

patriarchal ways in that certain fatwahas are constructed to restrict Muslim women's ability to resist and exist in public spaces.

Finally, the instrumentals used in the video represent an aesthetics of belonging. Though the exact instrumentals used in the video are unknown by the author of this paper, it is clear that Haydar incorporates a mix of instrumentals that are distinct to Eastern, African, and European cultures. The blending of distinct music instruments in Haydar's music video can be argued to show how Haydar tries to "adopt discursively pre-arranged subject positions" in order to "make sense of the world" and "to be made sense of" (Lithgow, 2017, p. 149). The catchy, unique, and familiar sound in the music video work to engage viewers from all backgrounds. This is further reinforced in regards to a Western audience, where "the music video has these Beyonce-esque elements," such as the "all-female cast, vibrant choreography and camera work," all of which "creates intimacy for the viewer (Wazwas, 2017).

Visual Analysis

The visual aesthetics of Haydar's music video are simplistic. The women are shown performing on roughly four different backgrounds that alternate throughout the video, each of which changes in the different number of vocalists that perform in front of the backdrop. Scenes are shot in monotone and plain backgrounds. Some of the backdrops in the music video, specifically, show a dull white-beige stairwell and a somber-looking room. Other backdrops show what appears to be a painting and a mural, but it is difficult to make sense of the content because they are either disrupted by the female vocalist's bodies or zoomed in too much for the author of this paper to analyze. The lack of props and exciting landscapes in the video, therefore, make Haydar and the vocalists the focal point of the video. The plain and uninteresting backdrops, specifically, position the bodies of Haydar and the vocalists as the spectacle to be

seen and observed in the music video. As a result, this forces viewers to draw their attention on Haydar and on the other Muslim vocalists and dancers in the music video.

The defiant stares of the actors on screen creates a relationship with viewers that results in a "radical de-centeredness," in which the very presence of Muslim Hijabi women initiates an interactive and reflective space between them and the viewer (Bloul, 2012, p. 149). An interaction between the Muslim women and the observer is established, either at a conscious or unconscious level. The observer, in understanding the video's message of female empowerment, begins to mentally question their own pre-conceived notions of Muslim women and their agency. This interaction establishes opportunities in which oriental and patriarchal conceptions of Muslim women are de-constructed.

The representation of plus size vocalists in the music video shows how it challenges patriarchal conceptions of beauty. Bartky argues how "the current body of [women's] fashion is taut, small-breasted, narrow-hipped, and of a slimness bordering emancipation" (1995, p. 28). The more thin, curvy, and light-skinned women are, the more acceptable they become by females and males alike. In a personal essay, Medina (2013) talks about the concept of body shaming within the socio-religious sphere of Islam. She recalls how she would be approached by members of her religious community telling her that her "obesity was a reflection of weak Iman (faith)" (para. 4). The judgement is based on the fact that Islam "instructs followers to not overfeed the body or to 'eat in moderation'" (Odoms-Young, 2008, p. 10). Medina argues that the portrayal of her obesity is a reflection of how her body is not just hers, rather, "it is exposed for the visual consumption, evaluation, fat-shaming and chubby-chasing by others" (2013, para.

4). This is in line with the disciplinary power of patriarchy that Bartky (1995) describes in her paper, where women are positioned to "stand perpetually before" the "gaze" and "judgment" of men (1995, p. 34).

Not only does Haydar's pregnant body on screen reject dominant notions of female beauty, especially normative conceptions of female representations on screen, but it also offers an interesting discussion about notions of motherhood that further amplifies Haydar's message of female empowerment. Badissy (2016) describes procreation from an Islamic perspective as a form of jihad, the struggle of oneself. Badissy contends that "women's biological jihād helps depict the woman an agent who is responsible about using all her human potential, the procreative function included, with full autonomy and awareness of her role as [the] vicegerent" (2016, p. 144). The element of procreation in the video, and the video's overall message of universal love symbolizes Haydar's way of trying to re-birth a nation that radiates in love and positivity. Specifically, Haydar's pregnant body works to dismantle the hatred and violence in the current nation.

The diverse racial cast in Haydar's music video works to disrupt a homogenized view of Muslim women. This is further reinforced with how each woman in the video portrays her own style of the hijab and clothing that is distinct to their own cultural backgrounds. This shows how not all Muslim women are the same. More importantly, the various racial representation of Muslim women on screen show how Islam is practiced differently by different social subjects. This shows how Islam, and in extension, Muslim bodies cannot be understood in a black or white framework. Rather, it shows how Muslim women are diverse and complex social beings that cannot be understood through minimalist generalizations and understandings.

It has been mentioned elsewhere in this paper that Black Muslim female bodies experience greater forms of violence due to their intersectionality, which is perpetrated by Islamophobic rhetoric. Haydar's music video, however, also offers a critical discussion of how black bodies experience racism within the Muslim community. The diverse female cast in the video and the lyrics, "love women every shading," provides a space to discuss the hidden racism within Muslim communities. Mohammed (2017) celebrates the representation of the "two black women" in the music video, who are the main backup dancers, citing that representations of Black Muslim women are a necessary form of representation within Islamic cyber-space. This is because Black Muslim bodies, in general, are not fairly represented in the narrative of the Ummah (Muslim Nation), where Muslims are no longer considered a cohesive and united front when talking about Black Muslim bodies. Collins argues that "by not belonging," Black female bodies "emphasize the significance of belonging" (Collins, 1990, p. 70). This is further reinforced by Mohammed (2017), where they contend that mediums like *Wrap my Hijab* create spaces that recognize "contributions from Black Muslims in their area of expertise, and having conversations about the racism which exists, despite some people's reluctance to admit it."

Conclusion

Overall, Haydar's music video seeks to reclaim the narrative of the hijab as a symbol of female empowerment. I have shown this by first describing the dominant, and paradoxical narrative of the hijab. I then provided a thoughtful analysis of the music video's auditory and visual aspect that shows how Haydar resists these patriarchal narratives. In doing so, Haydar reassigns the hijab as a symbol of power in the hopes of inspiring other Muslim women to continue occupying their space in sexy and fierce formation.

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