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Revealing the Face of Islamophobia: A Critical Evaluation of Western Feminism

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In 1978, Edward Said pinpointed and extracted the power dynamic between Western and Middle-Eastern cultures. In his book *Orientalism*, Said delves into the “relationship between the Occident and Orient” as “a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony” (10). This relationship between the Occident (the West, the dominant European culture) and the Orient (the focus on “other”) appears amongst and within several political, social, and cultural aspects. This hegemony, as Said explains, has ingrained itself within these aspects so as to affect and infect political relationships and allyships, social expression and inclusion, and refusal to understand or acknowledge cultures of the Orient.

The Occident has cultivated a parasitic relationship with the Orient, extracting and building its structure from the continued separation and hatred of the Orient. The Occidental culture exists solely in the realm of comparison with the Orient, creating a hollow culture that holds no purpose except to not be an “other.” The culture manifests itself as above and opposite of the Orient so that if and when the Occident reaches its self-perceived benevolent hand down to help the despondent Orient, it is the Occident who will be applauded and supported for the helping façade of the “poor, oppressed” Orient.

I. The Occident and Feminism

Through and because of Orientalism, Western culture has taken hold of a growing resentment towards Muslims, as has Western feminism. While people whisper “terrorist” in regards to the Muslim men, the women wearing hijabs are grouped together, forced to be pitied by the Western feminists who insist that their headscarves are oppressive and wrong. The savior complex of Western culture manifests the desire to pull Muslim people away from the “bad,” “barbaric,” and into the more “civilized” world. Western feminism extracts leverage from this savior complex, as well as from the ever-rampant Orientalism,

and, in the forced emancipation of these Muslim women, their benevolent act reveals Western feminism as the true oppressor.

As Occidental feminism gains support to help the so-called oppressed, the voices of these Muslim women diminish. The idea of oppression stems from comparisons with the American way of life or the “American Dream.” When freedom is defined by American standards, then anything below or different from these standards is oppressive and seemingly third world. Even among the Western world, freedom and other cultural aspects are defined by American standards. This influence can be seen from food speed expectations to cultural shifts, specifically in regards to comparisons between one’s country and another’s. If another’s country is not similar or approaching similarity with Western ideals, then that country is deemed as tragically barbaric and poor.

Stephen Morton, in his analysis of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s “Third World Women,” points out how quickly Western feminists are to “speak for all women, regardless of cultural differences,” reinforcing the damage Western feminism has wrought by providing blanket definitions of oppression, specifically regarding Muslim women (78). Additionally, Morton points out the “crucial need to challenge the universal humanist assumption, prevalent in some western feminist thought, that all women’s lives and histories are the same” (72). Morton’s focus on branching out from assumptions regarding all women’s lives (and perspectives) being the same is a key factor in dismantling the privileged ignorance of Western feminism and its effects on Muslim women. This toxic, Occidental feminism brings more oppression to Muslim women than the supposed patriarchal oppression under which Muslim women live.

II. Media and Islamophobia

The connection between the media and Islamophobia may not be openly apparent; however, the representation of Muslim people, specifically Muslim women and their roles, in the media further supports Western assumptions of the “backwardness” of head and full body coverings. In her article “The Urgency of Visual Media Literacy in Our Post-9/11 world: Reading Images of Muslim Women in the Print News Media,” Diane Watt explains

how the media shapes the view of Muslim women as “religious fundamentalism, male oppression, and terrorism” (33).

Furthermore, depending on the media to provide the majority of news regarding Muslim people and the roles of Muslim women “narrows our understandings of Muslim women’s lives, so we only come to ‘know’ them via a few stereotypes” (Watt, 35). The news, movies, and articles all are shaped by the Western view on Muslim people and their culture. The realities of these people, specifically the women, remains a mystery and we continue to view their cultural participation, such as the head coverings, as oppressive and in need of a savior.



Besides the news, TV shows, such as the show “Homeland,” further push stereotypes surrounding the relationship between white women and Muslim women. “Homeland” is based on the Israeli series “Prisoners of War,” focusing primarily on captivity by Al-Qaeda. Although the show had promise to shed light on Middle Eastern political issues, the storyline presented further solidifies the western assumption that any Muslim area is dangerous and the enemy. The picture to showcase Season 4 of Homeland shows a white woman in a red veil, looking back from a sea of women clad in full body coverings. The cluster of darkly shrouded women resembles a threat. In this image, the white woman is highlighted, as if the audience is supposed to feel the immense and hidden threat presented by the shrouded, female Muslim body. By contrasting the white woman with the face-less women in dark veils, Homeland not only creates a larger separation between White and “other,” but also dehumanizes Muslim women, clumping them into what is reminiscent of coal that could “harm” the white woman.

Anderson Beckmann Al Wazni conducted interviews with several Muslim women to find out their opinion and views on feminism, particularly Western feminism. One woman

helps highlight the issue with the Homeland photo: “We’re choosing to cover and that’s what’s empowering us. [People might ask] ‘Why would you hide all that beauty?’ And in that regards, it also challenges the definition of beauty” (331). This woman mentions how the hijab forces those around to rethink their definition of beauty, but this Homeland image refuses to even allow that challenge to appear, by simply hiding the faces of these women, removing their humanity and allowing the average viewer to better clump those wearing headscarves as an “other.” Western culture does not seem inclined to believe that Muslim women are capable of challenging beauty ideals while they are “oppressed.” Instead, Muslim women are forced into victimhood, and, as seen in the Homeland image, “the media [is] quick to pick up on the image of the veiled Muslim women [as a] symbolic image of oppression and violence” (326).

On November 1, 2017, Laura Loomer, an alt-right American political activist and Internet personality, tweeted several racist tweets about Muslims.

One reads: “I’m late to the NYPD press conference because I couldn’t find a non-Muslim cab or Uber Lyft driver for over 30 min! This is insanity.”

The second one, with an attached photo of two women wearing hijabs, reads: “Muslims are out in full force at the scene of the NYC #ISIS attack today rubbing it in everyone’s face. Aimlessly walking around in hijabs.”

This use of social media to post hateful and racist comments reinforces the idea that the Western way of living is the assumed “best” way of living and other cultures, particularly Muslim, are not only oppressive, but terroristic. Loomer’s clear misunderstanding of Muslim individuals and also her aggressive use of stereotypes is a small representation of the hostility surrounding Muslim people everyday, especially from Western culture. Loomer’s mentality towards Muslims, but specifically the “identifiable” Muslim women wearing hijabs, reinforces the Occident influences towards the Orient: that to be an Orient, to be Muslim, is to “[rub] it in everyone’s face.” Loomer assumes that every Muslim is inherently connected with ISIS, as indicative from the hijab: an easy way for racists such as Loomer to identify the “terrorists.”

The simple-mindedness needed to assume connections between terrorists and civilians solely on clothing choice stems from the Occident mindset of assuming the Orient is lesser in all senses: morals, intelligence, and civilization. Loomer specifically targets

Muslim women due to sheer laziness; the connection between a terrorist who may have happened to wear a head covering and the appearance of an individual who also wears a head covering is too much for the Occident person to process. The head covering must equate to terrorist and, when Loomer saw these Muslim women in hijab, they must also be ISIS-supporting terrorists. This thought process is extremely dangerous, as it furthers the perspective regarding Muslims, specifically Muslim women, and if they (the women) are not terrorists, they must be victims of the terrorists; either way, the headscarf becomes the enemy and must be removed.

The ACLU reported that hate crimes from 2000 to 2006 against Muslims within the United States rose 674%. Now, over a decade later, Muslim hate crimes are equally, if not more, prevalent and produce people such as Laura Loomer, fueled by the idea that Muslim women, in wearing a hijab, suddenly become supporters and participants of terrorist attacks, despite the attacker having been Muslim or not. In addition to these statistics, CAIR recently published a study that “not only found Islamophobia to be on the rise, but also found that hate crimes and acts of violence are more often directed at Muslim women, who wear hijabs, than Muslim men” (326). This violence may occur simply because it is easier to identify Muslim women by the headscarf, outing themselves to Western people as “other” and “terrorists.” The attribution of the headscarf to that of not only Muslim, but also a terrorist, continues to ingrain itself in Western culture and becomes stronger any time a bombing or a shooting occurs and the attacker’s race is not white.

The president of the United States Donald Trump recently retweeted videos from Jayda Fransen, a far-right anti-Muslim leader from the UK, despite her being arrested for attacking several Muslim women. The retweeted videos contained anti-Muslim propaganda and purposeful demonizing of Muslim people. The actual religion or origin of the person does not matter; if the person fits the stereotype of “terrorist” that western culture has planted into peoples’ minds, then the person and their assumed religion/culture are equally ostracized.

The seepage of Orientalism into Western feminism has created a toxic view of “others” in the world, specifically Muslim women. As Said reiterates throughout his work on Orientalism, the argument is that “Orientalism has less to do with the Orient and [more to do] with “our” world” (20). Although Orientalism has captured the Western culture and

created a noxious view in regards to the Orient, Western feminism is the true result of the ruinous media, stereotypes, and a “savior complex” culture. Orientalism is more of a comment on the culture that produced it – the Western culture – than to its victim – the Orient. The oppression of the Muslim woman (the Orient) is only defined in Western terms, completely negating any progression that the Orient is responsible for. If Western feminism continues to see the Muslim woman as “helpless” and aggressively “oppressed,” the cyclical perpetuation of Orientalism will continue.

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