The Entertainment Industry's Tokenization of the Hijab and its Islamophobic Implications

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Abstract

This essay analyzes the harmful effects caused by the negative portrayal of hijabis (Muslim women who wear the headscarf) in Western film and television shows. I discuss the religious significance of the hijab and how historical events like 9/11 and the Iranian Resolution of 1979 played crucial roles in the tokenization of the hijab, which has consequently led to the discrimination of hijabis and Muslim women in many facets of American society. The tokenization of the hijab has resulted in the misrepresentation of Muslim women who are portrayed as oppressed and coerced into following Islam by donning the hijab. A lack of awareness regarding this issue has increased anti-hijab rhetoric in the United States and created a harmful environment for hijabis living in the Western world. This essay also provides solutions to be implemented such as including hijabis in diversity reports and striving to create more accurate and respectful representations of hijabis in order to remedy the Islamophobia that plagues the entertainment industry.

Essay

A 35-year-old Muslim woman stood outside of Valentino, a high-end accessory and apparel store, in Manhattan on September 10, 2016 when she suddenly felt a burning sensation. Squinting through the flames that engulfed her body, she caught sight of a man holding a lighter while casually watching from a close distance (Elmir, 2019, para. 1). The woman, who chose to stay anonymous, reported the incident to the New York Police Department which investigated it as a possible hate crime. Attacks like this against hijabi women are a result of anti-hijab and anti-Muslim rhetoric, which have been pushed in different forms of media ranging from TV shows, movies, and news outlets during the recent decades.

Discrimination and hate crimes have become an almost universal experience for hijabis in the United States. Although statistics on hate crimes against Muslim women wearing the hijab are difficult to obtain because the Federal Bureau of Investigation does not track hate crimes by gender, the American Civil Liberties Union reported that "69% of women who wore hijab reported at least one incident of discrimination" (Rippy & Newman, 2008). Thus, the spread of Islamophobia through the media in the past two decades has enabled and increased the amount of microaggressions against hijabis. To add fuel to the flames, the entertainment industry and broadcasting services have further perpetuated anti-Muslim rhetoric in film and TV shows, creating a harmful and toxic environment for hijabis. These subliminal messages in film and TV shows throughout the years have painted a very one-dimensional image for hijabi characters: they are either depicted in limited roles as the oppressed or the oppressor. Their visibility has placed a target on hijabis' backs as much of the American public has consumed Islamophobic content regardless of whether they have been aware of their actions or not.

“Hijab” is a term that is often misunderstood in the secular world. At its core, “hijab” refers to both a metaphorical and physical barrier. Men and women have different hijabs that they are obligated to observe. As a part of their hijab, men are obligated to cover from their navel to their knees while women are required to cover that same area when in the presence of other women. However, in the presence of men who are not their *mahram* (direct relatives), they are required to cover their whole bodies with the exception of the faces, hands, and feet. While this is the traditional definition of the physical hijab, Muslims also refer to the headscarf as a hijab. In the context of this essay, the term “hijab” will refer to a headscarf (see Figure 1).

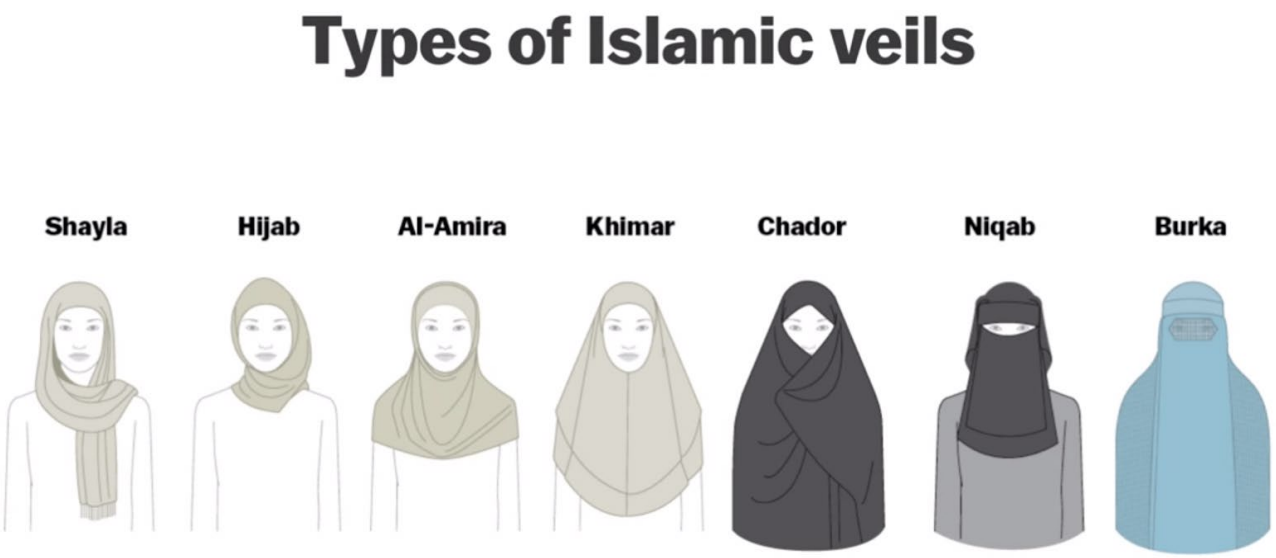

Figure 1 The infographic displays the different veils worn by Muslim women around the world. Types of Islamic Veils. (2017, June 12)

Islam preaches the idea of freewill and although Muslims are obligated to practice the hijab, just as they are obligated to fast during the month of Ramadan and abstain from alcohol and pork, they have the free will to choose to abide by these principles. Unfortunately, cultural customs upheld by misogynistic systems in many parts of the world have misconstrued the meaning of “obligation” in Islam and therefore, forced women to practice the hijab. By Islamic teachings, it is inherently unjust to force a woman to wear the hijab, just as it is unjust to force a woman to remove one. Despite being a religious attire worn to represent modesty and spirituality, the hijab garners negative attention through its portrayal in mainstream media as a symbol of oppression. Such distorted perpetuations harm the Muslim community and marginalize hijabis by portraying them as a meek subset of people in need of liberation.

Almost two decades after 9/11, the common “terrorist trope” used to portray Muslims on big screens is less common, but the underlying tones of Islamophobia are still present in many aspects of the entertainment industry. Yvonne Yazbak Haddad (2007), a professor of the History of Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations at the Prince Alwaleed Center for Muslim–Christian Understanding at Georgetown University, writes in her journal article “The Post-9/11 ‘Hijab’ as Icon” that following 9/11, putting on the hijab became an act that was vilified, and many women were forced to remove it out of fear of becoming subject to hate crimes (p. 260). The generalization of Muslims as terrorists subjugated hijabis to higher rates of hate crimes and discrimination because of this widespread fear. 9/11 affirmed the doubt that had been growing in the American public’s mind about Islam and its ties

to terrorism. As a result, Islam and terrorism became almost synonymous and those who appeared visibly Muslim became the target of hate crimes as the country tried to make sense of the great catastrophe that occurred on September 11th, 2001.

Improper Portrayals of Hijabis in Media

Recently, a drama series created by the streaming service, Netflix, has received notable criticism for using the "damsel in distress" character trope to represent a Muslim hijabi character. *Elite*, a Spanish thriller that first aired in 2018 depicts a Palestinian girl named Nadia who removes her hijab in the second season of the show as an act of independence and liberation while she falls for a man that her abusive family disapproves of. This exact trope has been played out in several movies and television shows in the past. Shows and movies like *Ramy*, *Quantico*, *Hala*, and even *Grey's Anatomy* are guilty of creating plots centered around the removal of a woman's hijab (See Figure 2). The removal of the hijab in shows and movies are not always explicitly written as in *Elite*, where the writers and filmmakers dedicate an entire montage to signify Nadia's liberation from the headscarf. The writers also employ subtle tactics to unveil a hijabi, as done in *Grey's Anatomy*, where a doctor removes her hijab to use as gauze to treat a wound on a patient's leg. Here, the focus shifts from the unveiling of a hijab as a sign of liberation to an act of voyeurism, used to uncover a hijabi in a perverse manner. These scenes disregard the value and importance of the headscarf and tokenize it to be nothing more than a method to show the audience what lies under the article of clothing. Furthermore, it perpetuates the notion that hijabs are a symbol of oppression and negates the spiritual significance for the hijab.

Figure 2 The character, Raina Amin (played by Yasmine Al-Massri) removes her hijab to show her hair to her love interest, Simon Asher (played by Tate Ellington). Quantico's bait and switch. (n.d.).

This issue will continue as long as there is an audience willing to consume this problematic content. While the narrative surrounding the hijab seen on the screen has changed since 9/11, the hijab is still inadequately represented as a tool of oppression. Instead of depicting hijabis as terrorists who are opposed to western society, they are depicted as outsiders yearning to assimilate to western culture but are held back by their repressive religion and families. This storyline also plays well into Hollywood's white savior complex as many of the women remove their hijabs after falling for the white

male love interest who frees them from their “backwards” lifestyles. The white savior complex has existed in media for centuries and originates from the perception many colonizers and settlers had that people of indigenous origins and different cultures needed to be saved from their “savage” and primitive lifestyles (Hughey, 2010). With time, the complex has changed but it is still apparent in much of film and media consumed today. Older movies like *Pocahontas* have leaned heavily into the white savior complex with characters like John Smith, a white settler who is used to portray English colonizers as kind, yet irrational at times. Recently, popular Oscar nominated movies like *Green Book* and *Hidden Figures* are also guilty of playing into the white savior complex as the person of color is only able to succeed in their journey with the assistance of a white person. Because of its long history in media, it comes as no surprise that this complex was used once again in shows like *Elite* and *Hala*; the audience is accustomed to seeing such tropes played out in films and shows time and time again.

Filmmakers have also effectively used the act of removing a hijab as a prop to signify a woman’s liberation. As a result, it has created a negative perception of the hijab, not only for the general public, but also Muslim women. Muslims become more hesitant to wear the hijab out of fear of discrimination or have others to believe that it is a cry for help. Sahar Aziz (2012), a Professor of Law at Rutgers University, wrote that “some [non-Muslims] doubted that a Muslim woman could “choose” to wear the headscarf. Rather, she was coerced by male (or female) family members or indoctrinated from youth to accept the headscarf as mandatory for her spiritual salvation” (p. 28). This again ties into the white savior complex as even when Muslim women reassured others that they chose to wear the hijab, they were overlooked and disregarded, viewed as too submissive to make a choice of their own. So, when filmmakers argue that they continually show the liberation of women by removing the hijab, it directly implies that women practicing the hijab are oppressed by wearing it.

The tree of Islamophobia has spread its roots into various parts of society, ranging from harassment in the workplace to even discriminatory laws that were created under the guise of preventing terrorism. The removal of the headscarf has been a common tactic to embarrass and scare hijabis. A *New York Times* article published in November of 2020 highlighted the slow progression of justice for hijabis, detailing the story of two hijabi women who sued the New York Police Department for forcing them to remove the hijab before taking a police photograph. The women, Jamila Clark and Arwa Aziz, spent years fighting for their right to practice their religion when the law upheld injustice. Both Clark and Aziz reported feeling ashamed and exposed while they were forcefully photographed in front of male prisoners and other employees. They reached a settlement with the police department that agreed to “allow religious people to be photographed in head coverings so long their faces were [are] unobstructed” (Alan Feuer, para. 3). Although their lawsuit was a notable victory for hijabis and people of other faiths who were discriminated against for their religious attire, it is disheartening to observe that basic respect was only achieved and acknowledged very recently in late 2020 and is a stark reminder that there is still much work to be done in order to undo the effects of Islamophobia that run rampant through multiple facets of society.

As a result of the negative portrayal of hijabis in most avenues of media, hate crimes against hijabis have drastically increased in the recent years when compared to non-hijabi women and Muslim men. Nadine Naber, Associate Professor in the Gender and Women's Studies Program at the University of Illinois at Chicago, conducted a survey on Muslim populations where she argues, “[A] general consensus among community leaders was that federal government policies [after 9/11] disproportionately targeted men while hate crimes and incidents of harassment in the public sphere

disproportionately targeted women" (as cited in Alimahomed-Wilson, 2017, p. 77). Because the hijab provides visibility to Muslim women, it made them an easier target to hate crimes and harassment while Muslim men do not have that visibility unless they are dressed in traditional Arab or Islamic attire. Many Muslim women have found that the only way to prevent themselves from this discrimination is to remove the hijab, an act which much of the west associates with as liberation and a renouncement of faith. This negative perception of hijabis in American society has bled into film and other avenues of media, painting hijabis as self-loathing and seeking freedom.

The effort to combat Islamophobia in the entertainment industry comes with backlash as critics shift the narrative and point to countries like Saudi Arabia where women are forced to veil as proof that the very existence of the hijab is oppressive. While there is reasonable discourse on this subject matter, the issue with the representation of hijabis on film is that they are almost always depicted as characters in need of liberation, which feeds directly into the mentality that Muslim women are submissive and confined by their "oppressive" religion. Rarely is there a film that depicts the hijab in a positive light and provides hijabis with good representation. Professor of Sociology and Human Geography at the University of Oslo, Inger Furseth (2014), conducted a study on hijabi women, concluding that "the women who refer to obedience as a motivation for covering implicitly present themselves as women who fulfill a moral obligation in Islam. The narratives delineate the ways in which perceptions of gender underpin a boundary work that shapes categorizations of the religious other" (p. 371). The obedience that many assume Muslim women abide by is centered around a patriarchal structure where women are subservient to their husbands or male relatives. However, Furseth dispels that myth by clarifying that a hijabi woman's motivation for wearing the headscarf is to increase spirituality and obey the principles of God. As mentioned earlier, forcing women to wear a hijab is considered unlawful or *haram* in Islam, so when the argument of "Muslim" countries like Saudi Arabia and its limitation on women's rights is brought into a conversation, it does not provide a strong argument because the laws upheld in the country show an extreme and twisted ideology that misrepresent Islamic teachings.

Time and time again, the meaning of the hijab and its significance is disregarded to push the false narrative that the hijab is oppressive and has thus created a new character archetype in movies and T.V. shows: the hijabi who is shackled to the chains of her oppressive religion and only finds liberation in disassociating from Islam, her hijab, and abusive family. As with any other group of people identifying with certain religious practices or cultural customs, hijabis are not a monolith. It directly feeds into the white savior complex and does little to provide representation for hijabis on film and television. It also creates a very hostile environment for hijabis who are misunderstood and viewed as people with no body autonomy. The oversaturation of media that constantly portrays the hijab in a distasteful manner perpetuates the idea that all Muslim women are forced to wear it and disregards the millions of women who find liberation by donning a headscarf.

A Brief History of the Marginalization of Hijabis

This problem snowballed into an even greater issue during the 21st century as a result of an increase in film and media that continued to use the character trope of a subservient hijabi woman to feed into the public's perception of how Islam is an oppressive religion. Of the multiple facets in their identity, some Muslim women find their religious identity to be a strong factor in the way they present

themselves, and so wearing the hijab is a crucial practice. In a graduate thesis written by Erum Tariq-Munir (2014), a sociology student at the Iowa State University, “Muslim women wear the hijab primarily to create a cultural space for themselves” and to create their own boundaries (p. 18). The tokenization and perversion of the hijab to represent oppression can be seen as a failure on much of the western world refusing to take the opportunity to understand the meaning behind the article of clothing. This failure was caused by recent trends that have portrayed Islam as a domineering religion, the impacts of 9/11 on the American community in the early 21st century, and the effects of the 1979 Iranian Revolution that resulted in the production of anti-hijab and Islamophobic content in the decades that followed. These events are critical to understanding the issue that lies in much of the controversy surrounding the unrealistic portrayal of the hijab because it provides historical context to show how the tokenization of hijabis in film today has escalated to such a serious problem.

To understand the negative sentiment surrounding the hijab, it is important to understand where the general public’s perception of the hijab first shifted and when the veil’s appearance in the media became a symbol of opposition against freedom. This can be traced back to the Iranian Revolution of 1979 (also referred to as the Islamic Revolution) where the new *shah*, a title given to Iranian kings and emperors, Ayatollah Khomeini, enforced strict hijab laws to increase conservatism and religious piety following decades of secularism in Iran. This law was a result of counterculture, the effort to fight back against previous laws in the 1930s that banned the hijab and forcibly removed it from women seen wearing it in public (BBC, 2019). Before 1979, Iran was an anomaly in the Middle East, with fashion trends rivaling those in Europe and a secular society emerging (See Figure 3). However, Khomeini’s strict veil laws successfully isolated Iran from the rest of the world and created a staunchly conservative society that held little semblance to the secular society decades prior.

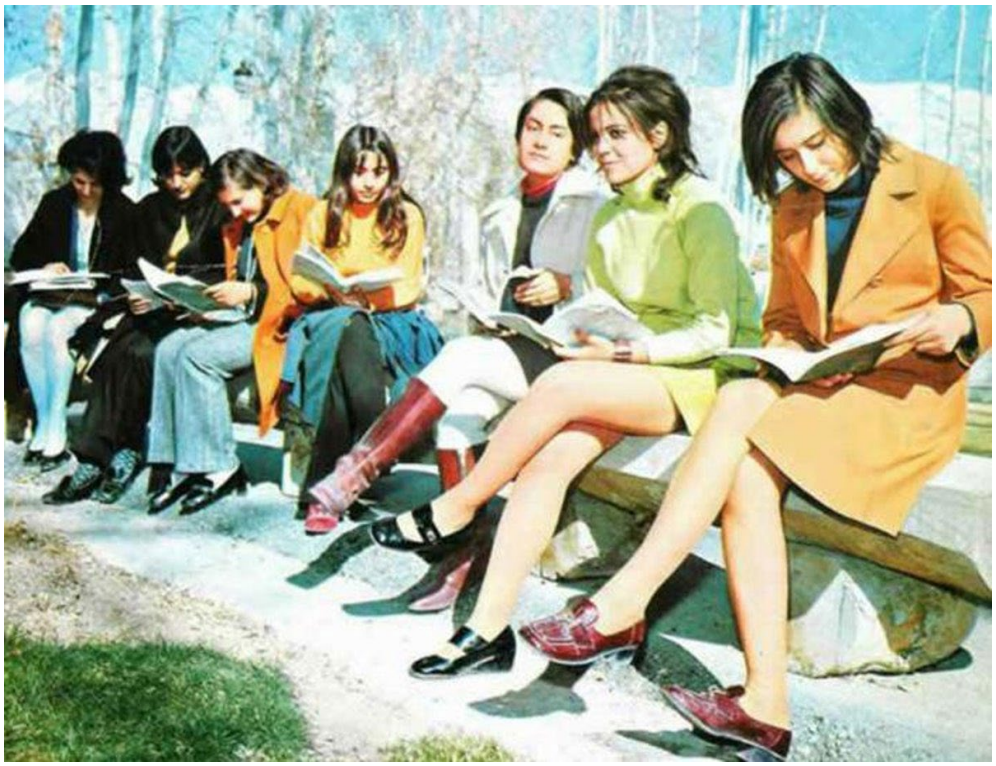

Figure 3 This image is often used to represent the fashion trends and culture in Iran prior to the Revolution. The women here are seen wearing miniskirts and colorful clothes as most women did not practice the veil. Dejevsky, M. (2018, January 4). I stayed in Iran during the last days of the shah. What I saw is important. The Independent.

Figure 4 An Iranian family goes to attend Friday prayer at their local mosque in 1980. The women are observing a type of veil that was enforced during the Revolution. BBC. (2019, February 8). Iranian women - before and after the Islamic Revolution. BBC News.

When observing images like these that show a contrast between the clothing and veiling of women before and after the Islamic Revolution, it is important to be critical of the photographers' stylistic choices. Figure 4 shows women in 1980, but is printed in black and white, while Figure 3 from the 1970s is colorized. This subtle change ingrains the idea that the hijab is a symbol of an era long ago when women had few rights and freedoms and is therefore, an outdated and backward practice. In fact, when looking for images of Iran before and after the revolution, a common theme is present where most of the pre-revolution photos are colorized while photos during and after the revolution are almost always in black and white. This trend is no coincidence as it further perpetuates the idea that hijabs and veils are representative of old archaic practices, which negates the experiences of Muslim women who choose to veil. The implicit bias when representing both types of women further creates a divide between the perception of hijabis and those who do not wear the hijab. While the ramifications of the Iranian Revolution were extremely dangerous to women in the country who were forced to veil, the same can be said about the anti-veil laws prior to the revolution that prohibited hijabs. A serious issue lies in the western media choosing to only highlight the oppressive hijab laws post-1979 and turn a blind eye to the discrimination hijabis faced before this time period because it aligned with a secular society that was idealized in the Western sphere. Both eras were harmful to women as they stripped them of their bodily autonomy yet only the Islamic Revolution is seen as oppressive to the women of Iran.

The Islamic Revolution also influenced the film industry following the next few decades leading up to 9/11. The veiling and oppression of women in Iran directly affected the perception Iranian men, who were wrongly seen as instigators of the veil laws and as a result, were depicted as brutish and merciless. Films like The *Delta Force* (1986) and *True Lies* (1994) depict the American government engaging in counterterrorism efforts to fight against Arab and Muslim men who are portrayed as

inhumane and cruel perpetrators in the Middle East. Hollywood successfully created the American heroes of this film to appear as the ideal protagonists while Muslim men were pitted against them as the ideal antagonists. In his thesis “The Age of Sympathy: Re-examining discourses of Muslim terrorism in Hollywood beyond the ‘pre-’ and ‘post-9/11’ dichotomy”, Jay Reid, a research graduate of the Department of Media at the University of Adelaide analyzes how films centered around the negative portrayal of Muslim populations “serves to imbue audiences with the belief that all Middle Eastern men are characterized by their love of violence and their involvement with terrorist activities” (2015, p. 99). Many films during the 1980s and 1990s portrayed Arab and Muslim men as villains while simultaneously depicting Muslim women as helpless or excluding them from the narrative altogether. This was undoubtedly a result of growing anti-Islamic sentiment following the Islamic Revolution because the portrayal of Muslim and Arab men during the 1930s when the hijab was banned and hijabis were discriminated against did not reflect any sort of anti-Islamic sentiment and the ‘terrorist’ trope was not synonymous with these populations.

Following the events of 9/11, government regulations and background checks on people of Arab descent or Muslim faith also significantly increased. Dubbed flight risks, Muslims have spent the last two decades going through extra TSA checks at airports. There is more of a concerning issue present than just the checks; it is the dehumanization that comes along with the process. The idea that Muslims are screened and scrutinized under such a discriminatory spotlight is reflective of the United States’ apparent inequality, as such people are automatically generalized to be terrorists. In a survey conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute, about 60% of Americans believed that Islam clashes with American values (See Figure 5). The increase in perception that Muslim values are in direct opposition with American values creates a dichotomy between both communities, as well as identity issues for Muslim Americans who feel pressured to choose one identity over the other.

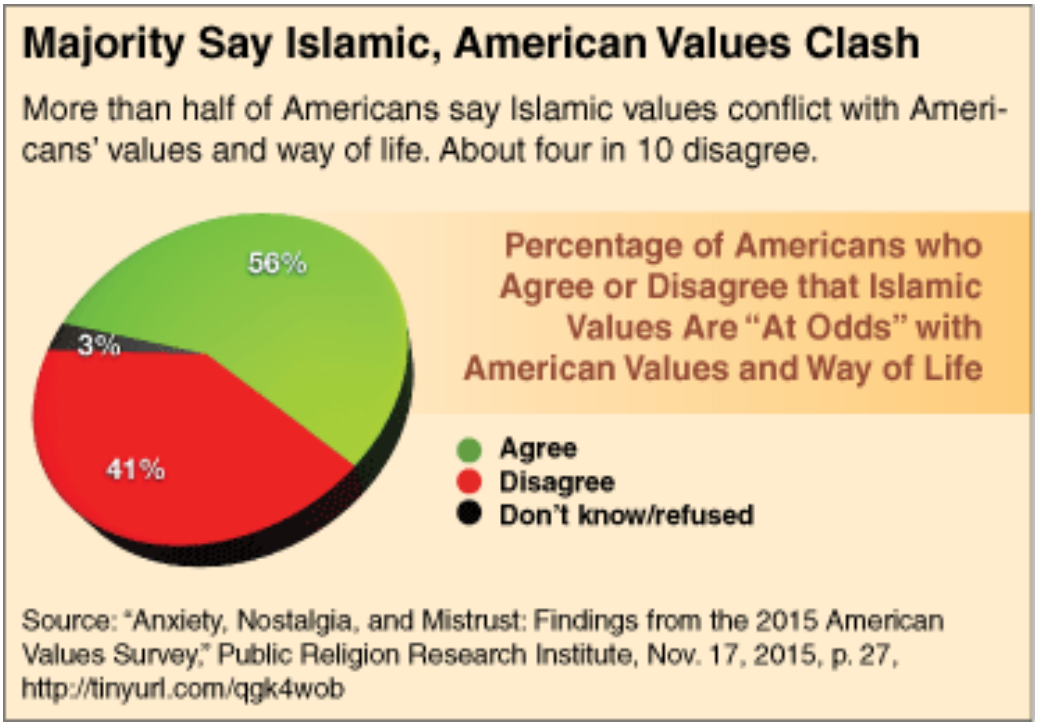

Figure 5 About 60% of people in America believe that Islamic and American values cannot coexist. In 2011, only 47% of Americans held that view. Anxiety, Nostalgia, and Mistrust: Findings from the 2015 American Values Survey (2015, Jones, Cox, Cooper & Lienesch)

In a publication written by the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding and the British Council, Shar Aziz (2012), an Associate Professor of Law at Texas Wesleyan University School of Law, notes the effects of Islamophobia on Muslim women, stating that, “Irrespective of their place of origin or skin color, the headscarf ‘marks’ women as sympathetic to the enemy, presumptively disloyal, and forever foreign” (p. 3). Without taking the time to learn about the true meaning of the hijab, much of the American public has associated hijabis with the bearers of terrorism or at the very best, “one of the good ones,” suggesting that once they become familiar with a hijabi, they label her as an anomaly from a larger subset of Muslims who are seen as terrorists. This harmful stereotype ostracizes Muslim women from the general American public and creates consequences for hijabis who are constantly regarded as foreigners in the land they were born in.

There have also been many efforts by right wing groups to categorize Islam as a political ideology as opposed to a religion. Websites like *politicalIslam.com* serve to “educate” the American population about the dangers of Islam and *Shariah* (Islamic laws). By molding Islam to fit into the West’s idea of a political ideology, they have argued that the first amendment does not protect the religious freedoms of Muslims because they do not view Islam as a religion. “While many, if not all, Muslim terrorists are motivated by political objectives, law enforcement’s response effectively recasts Islam as a political ideology, thereby legitimizing harsh investigative and prosecutorial techniques unconstrained by policies that infringe on religious freedoms,” said Aziz (2012, p. 6). Misrepresenting Islam as a political ideology delegitimizes the religion and followers of the faith. This overgeneralization of Islam to represent a political ideology is common trend in both the United States and European countries.

As with many issues that emerge in society, a problem escalates over time in a series of microaggressions that do not become apparent until the situation becomes a matter of great concern. Before the tokenization of the hijab was prevalent, the focus was centered on the barbarization of Arab and Muslim men that created the “damsel in distress” trope for their female counterparts who were seen as fragile and exotic beings in need of foreign aid. In “Representations of Muslim bodies in The Kingdom: Deconstructing discourses in Hollywood”, author Michelle Aguayo discusses the common tropes that are used to depict Muslim men, women, and Middle Eastern countries and how it creates a harmful image for them in the real world. Aguayo explains how Jack Shaheen, a writer dedicated to addressing the racial and ethnic stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims in popular culture “elucidates the ways in which Hollywood has vilified the Arab community by representing them as money hungry, dangerous men or eroticized women” (2009, p. 44). This has created a barbaric and hyper masculinized caricature of Arab men that emerged post 9/11 in an effort to portray Arabs and Muslims as a direct threat to American ideals. It results in serious consequences for both Muslim men and women because it perpetuates the crude portrayals of one-dimensional characters that see the Western Sphere as a threat to their livelihood. The trope also highlights another issue present in America’s perception of the Middle East: the conflation of religion and culture, making the terms *Muslim* and *Arab* appear interchangeable with one another, when the reality is that Islam is a multicultural religion and not all Arabs are Muslim.

A majority of events leading to the misrepresentation of the hijab within the entertainment industry have emerged within the past four decades, starting with the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and gaining serious momentum following the September 11th attacks. Action needs to be taken to undo the current system in place that turns a blind eye to the religious discrimination that hijabis encounter on

a regular basis. It is only through addressing the failures of many countries in the West in regard to the treatment of hijabis that lasting change for the Muslim community can be an attainable outcome, and hijabis can finally receive accurate and respectful representation in films and TV shows.

Solutions to Rectify the Misrepresentation

In a journal article written by Nourizan Hussain, a senior lecturer at Taylors' University in Malaysia, "Islam was deplorable in Canada and the Americas during the late 1990s because the practice of veiling is considered backwards and associated to underdeveloped nations, mainly due to the Gulf War and the struggles of the Middle East" (2014, p. 429). As a result, Hollywood films and TV programs capitalized off of the growing concerns over Islamic lifestyles and continued to perpetuate the harmful stereotypes about Islam and Muslims, suggesting that women who wore the hijab were inferior and subjugated to Islam's so called "oppressive" rules. It is necessary to address the failures of many Western societies in regard to the treatment of hijabis so that this issue can be addressed and hijabis can receive an accurate and respectful representation in the media.

In pursuit of solutions and policies that can be enacted to protect the rights of Muslim women, specifically hijabis, one flaw becomes painfully clear. There are no human rights resolutions, policies, or white papers on the table trying to protect them from the misrepresentation they face in the media. Thus, it becomes the responsibility of the general public to create solutions to this issue and fight against the Islamophobia hijabis are overwhelmingly subjugated to. The first course of action to be taken is to discuss the misrepresentation of hijabis in film and TV in diversity reports that observe the representation of other minoritized groups in the media. While this may seem like a small step and not a solution at first glance, it is only once the issue that plagues Hollywood, and the entertainment industry is highlighted that action can be taken to prevent the further tokenization of the hijab in the media. By discussing the inaccurate portrayal of hijabis in film and TV shows, conversations around the fetishization and tokenization of the hijab will give way for lasting change that will provide Muslim women with better representation. The next solution turns attention away from the film companies that create this problematic content and supports businesses and studios that strive to create a safe space for hijabis by creating positive character portrayals in the real world. This will be difficult to address because it requires the support of the general public so it is crucial that consumers first understand the negative implications behind the problematic depictions of the hijab so they are conscious of why they should boycott studios that produce Islamophobic content. These solutions are necessary to tackling the bias against hijabis that exists today because they will shed light on the consistent tokenization of the hijab that results in real world consequences for hijabis.

A root cause of the widespread tokenization of the hijab in a variety of American media stems from a lack of discussion surrounding the issue. When searching for policies in favor of protecting the rights of hijabis in both the entertainment industry and society, it becomes evident that there is little in their favor. Even more so, when analyzing inclusivity and diversity in films, hijabis are not even included in the conversation. In a study done by the University of Southern California Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, 1,300 popular films were analyzed to examine their portrayals of gender, race, ethnicity, LGBTQ, and disability representation in films from the years 2007 to 2019 (Annenberg Foundation, 2020). While the study analyzed the depiction of a variety of underrepresented groups in films throughout the last decade, one issue was apparent: the topic of the tokenization of the hijab is still

not discussed. What separates the issue hijabis experience from much of the diversity initiatives taking place today is that hijabis are also misrepresented, not just underrepresented. Change within the entertainment industry can only be brought about once meaningful conversations regarding the objectification of hijabis take place.

Starting conversations about the misrepresentation of hijabis will help create a better environment for all hijabis in the future by ensuring that the general public is aware of the Islamophobic character portrayals that are not a good reflection of most hijabis in the real world. Discussing the oppression of Muslim women in film comes with nuance yet this nuance has not been addressed in larger academic circles that analyze the representation of minoritized groups. The Islamic Women's Welfare Council of Victoria in Australia is an organization that advocates for an accurate portrayal of Muslim women in media. The organization published the book, *Media guide: Islam and Muslims in Australia* (2005), which discussed guidelines that the film and media industry should follow to ensure a positive and respectful representation for Muslim women. They stress the importance of including Muslim voices in dialogue about the tokenization of the hijab and hijabi characters, stating,

> "The capacity and role of Muslim women exceeds comments on the hijab or issues of gender oppression. It is crucial that women's expertise be recognised in all matters relating to Islam and their contribution should be sought beyond the "women's perspective" approach. Until the role of women is acknowledged, it will not be possible to understand Muslims or Islam" (Bedar et al., p. 5).

This emphasizes the need for intersectionality within the entertainment industry because it is not enough to simply have Muslim man or woman present in the writer's room. A Muslim woman will be able to share her own experiences with discrimination related to her gender identity and religion. By doing so, it will keep studios in check, ensuring that they do not enable the tokenization of the hijab. Thus, by providing more opportunities for Muslim women to share their relationship with the hijab and its significance, a more positive outlook surrounding the image of the hijab will emerge, benefiting all hijabis who may feel misunderstood in American society.

The media guide also identifies seven characteristics found in film and TV shows that are a cause of concern in the representation of hijabis and Muslims. Some of the common tropes that the Islamic Women's Welfare Council of Victoria take issue with are highlighted in a list of stereotypes writers tend to fall on when creating Muslim and hijabi characters. The council notes that Muslim characters are typically associated with violence, specifically post 9/11 and that the common stereotypical representation of a Muslim woman shows her in a veil and portrays her as submissive. This book is beneficial in the advocacy of hijabi and Muslim rights because it outlines many common problematic tropes that are overplayed when the film industry includes Muslim and hijabi characters in their scripts. Thus, this solution benefits a great number of hijabis because it calls out studios that are complicit and profit from the tokenization of the hijab.

This solution may face some obstacles coming to fruition because of the current mindset that surrounds the cultural and religious importance of the hijab. Although it is one of the first steppingstones in the path to solving Hollywood and the entertainment industry's tokenization of the hijab, it requires the support of the general public and a willingness to accept hijabis without any criticism for their appearance. The biggest roadblock in this solution's success will be the ability to change the public's perception of Islam. Referring to the 2015 survey by the Public Religion Research

Institute where roughly 60% of Americans believed that Islamic values clash with American values, it becomes evident that Muslims and any representation of Islam is still seen as an ideology in opposition to western society (see Figure 5). Through the further perpetuation of such values in media, many Americans have concluded that Islam is a threat to American democracy and as a result, hijabis who are very visible in the practice of their faith are subjugated to discrimination and are perceived as weak and oppressed. By changing the narrative around the hijab and amplifying the voices of hijabis, the American public will learn about the true significance of the hijab and will understand the misrepresentation of this article of clothing. This comes at virtually no cost as well; spotlighting hijabi voices only requires inclusivity and accurate representation within the film industry and representation in diversity reports that work to showcase Hollywood's strides in the representation of minoritized voices.

While it is important to tackle the tokenization of the hijab in Hollywood by discussing the need for the inclusion of hijabis in diversity reports and discussions about the misrepresentation of minoritized groups, another viable solution to this issue is to shift focus away from large media companies and instead show support for smaller studios that may have smaller budgets but are focused on providing a respectful and accurate representation for hijabis that does not tokenize aspects of their identify or religion. In her research paper analyzing the inequalities and misrepresentation of Muslim bodies within the realm of film and entertainment, Abida Eijaz, an assistant professor and researcher at the University of the Punjab, Pakistan wrote,

> "In capitalist societies, media is driven by profit maximization. Popular taste becomes the choice of the media. Hollywood films with negative depictions of Muslims/Arabs/Islam usually become popular and do good business therefore; the preferred choices of the producers remain negative and stereotypical depictions,"

in her research of trends that depict Muslim bodies in Western films (2018, p. 16). Many film studios and writers are reluctant to change their storylines if they know that a certain trope will perform well.

Eijaz's observation of the consumption of Islamophobic content in popular culture is very important in the discussion that centers around aiming to break these tropes in the media. In a capitalist society fueled by a desire to receive the most views and box office hits, it comes as no surprise that the tokenization of hijabis occurs time and time again; there is reasonable backlash, but the profits generated from the films and shows overrule any morality that exists within the industry. The power dynamic that exists today allows for Hollywood to maintain the upper hand by deciding what content to produce. A viable solution to this issue is simple: stop watching these films. While Hollywood is reluctant to listen to general criticism by the public, it is very easily swayed by its consumers' wallets. According to *Time*, *Elite* garnered over 20 million views following the first four weeks of its release back in 2018 (Gajanan, 2019). With such a large viewership, this series is currently in its fourth season where Nadia is still portrayed without a hijab, yet fans of the show either do not recognize the problematic portrayal of Islam and hijabis or are willing to overlook these issues. If viewers had recognized the tokenization of the hijab and if the show had received considerable backlash for their depiction of Muslim and hijabi characters, meaningful change could have been a possible avenue. Because of this, it is important to understand why it is necessary to hold film companies accountable for their actions and that the real way to create meaningful change within the industry is to stop watching problematic shows and movies.

Supporting smaller studios and turning away from larger studios that enable the production Islamophobic content will benefit many hijabis and Muslims across the United States and other Western countries because companies complicit in the tokenization of the hijab will feel pressure from the general public after facing backlash for the misrepresentation of hijabis. According to Pew Research, Muslims make up about 24% of the global population and about 3.45 million Muslims reside in The United States (Lipka, 2017). However, the representation of Muslim bodies and hijabis in mainstream media lack diversity and consistently cast actors with Arab and South Asian features, disregarding the millions of other Muslims of different ethnicities. Sue Obeidi, a director of the Muslim Public Affairs Council's Hollywood Bureau, and Evelyn Alsultany, an associate professor at the University of Southern California discuss the ramifications of Hollywood's generalization of Muslims. They have created a comprehensive list called the "Obeidi-Alsultany Test" that evaluates films and TV shows to determine if they provide a nuanced background for Muslim and hijabi characters. The Obeidi-Alsultany Test checks a variety of criteria similar to the media handbook created by the Islamic Women's Welfare Council of Victoria, determining if the Muslim character is solely defined by their religion, and if they have a detailed backstory with a diverse portrayal of Muslim characters (Obeidi & Alsultany, 2020). The test also checks for the inclusion of Muslim staff and writers to ensure that Muslim and hijabi characters are portrayed accurately. This solution is beneficial for hijabis because it raises awareness and reaches a wide audience by using the internet as a medium to share the entertainment industry's oversight in the representation of hijabi characters.

The solution is also cost effective because the need for inclusivity does not require a large budget. Pro-hijab films do not require anything different from any other film aside from a better moral compass that does not seek to sexualize the hijabi or diminish the role of the hijab. The films and shows that depict hijabi characters simply need to be more respectful toward the hijab and the representation of Muslim women. Shankhamala Ray, a short film maker and Doctoral Scholar of the International Relations Department at Jadavpur University in Kolkata, India analyzed films that steer from the current "normative" portrayal of Muslim women and hijabis by making them dynamic characters who are not domesticated or held down by cultural standards. Within her research, "Islamic women in Films: Turning the Voyeurs into Spectators", Ray studies several films that spotlight Muslim Middle Eastern and Asian women. What sets the films apart from mass media films and TV shows consumed by Western society is that these films are typically made by Islamic filmmakers who center their work on the accurate and positive portrayal of hijabis and Muslim women in Islamic societies (2012, p. 4). These film makers are immersed in Islamic society and as a result, do justice when touching upon a Muslim woman's faith and hijab. The emphasis on nuance in these films is also important to note because the practice of the hijab varies among Muslim women. The reasons for observing the hijab vary from person to person and cultural roles also affect a hijabis relationship with the headscarf. What many western filmmakers fail to observe is to account for the nuance that is needed when discussing the role of the hijab. By disregarding this aspect, the hijab is diminished to a piece of cloth and without the religious significance present, the hijab is continually tokenized in film and TV shows. Analyzing these films from a subjective standpoint is important because it helps viewers understand the Muslim woman's relationship with Islam, her family, her culture, and how she presents her religious identity to the world. Many western films and shows like *Elite*, *Hala*, and *Quantico* fail to consider these facets of a hijabi's identity and thus procure a self-loathing Muslim woman who vies to be freed from the chains of her religion. The incorporation of films with positive

Muslim roles does not come at a great cost; it simply requires the film industry in Western societies to recognize that Muslim women can come in different forms and should be portrayed in a positive light without a subplot that is centered around the removal of the hijab.

While much of Hollywood and the entertainment industry portray the hijab as an article of clothing that is in opposition to women's rights, the reality stands that it is strongly rooted in the liberation of many Muslim women. As with any other group of people, Muslim women are not a monolith and representing them as such in mainstream media distorts the public's perception of hijabis and Islamic values. The negative portrayal of hijabis in mainstream media prove to have serious repercussions for Muslim women in the real world as they face higher rates of discrimination and their visibility make them an easy target in Western society. However, this discrimination can be reduced with the introduction of better hijabi characters in films and TV shows that do not attempt to unveil a hijabi and tokenize both her and her religion. By hiring writers who do not vilify Islam and create a "damsel in distress" character trope that many hijabi characters currently conform to, hijabis will not experience stereotyping and discrimination at the current rate they do today. Promoting an inclusive environment in Hollywood will allow for discussions on the importance of intersectionality which will lead to better hijabi and Muslim representations in film and TV shows. While there is a long way to go in the effort to eradicate Islamophobic biases that exist in many facets of American society ranging from the public's long held perceptions of Muslim women and hijabis to the entertainment industry's perpetuation of Islamophobic content, the current efforts by many organizations around the world strive to create lasting change in the film industry for years to come.

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