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Navigating the #MeToo Terrain in an Islamophobic Environment

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Abstract: In this paper, I explore the significance of an intersectional lens when it comes to our conversations surrounding the #MeToo movement, in particular the way that such a lens helps us in recognizing narratives of sexual assault and harassment that are not typically viewed as such. Examining Black feminist activism and theory exposes how myopic the discourse on #MeToo has been in the United States when it comes to women who are non-dominantly situated within societal structures. In particular, this paper looks at how Muslim American women's issues surrounding sexual assault and harassment are presented as exotic and a function of their religion and culture, further narrowing what is considered worthy of attention within the discourse of the #MeToo movement. I argue that one such instance of sexual harassment that isn't seen as such is hijab snatching within particular contexts. Furthermore, I argue that a lack of an intersectional lens results in not only privileging certain harmful voices under the guise of inclusivity, but even when invaluable voices are allowed to enter mainstream discourse, they are often the sort that sidestep issues of Western imperialistic practices, Islamophobia, racialization of Muslims, etc. I highlight the dangers of speaking for others, especially in ways that attribute sexual violence experienced by Muslim women to their cultures and/or their men. I argue that acknowledging these dangers is in itself a crucial part of an inclusive #MeToo conversation.

Section One: Decentering Herstory Through an Intersectional Lens

Which narratives get to be part of the conversation on the #MeToo movement and why? Who are "our" people? What are "our" struggles when it comes to sexual assault and harassment? The paper examines how specific concerns

of Muslim American women are often exoticized and othered, instead of being presented under the umbrella of #MeToo. I argue that one such example of sexual harassment that is left out of the conversations on MeToo is hijab snatching within particular contexts. But why are some narratives privileged over others? The paper argues that a lack of an intersectional lens results in privileging certain harmful views—views that play into the stereotype of uncivilized Muslim men and justify imperialist projects. And even when valuable narratives—such as the #Mosque-MeToo movement—do become part of the mainstream conversation, they often get uptake precisely because those narratives focus on intra-community violence and ignore examples of inter-community violence that are sites of imperialism. An inclusive conversation on #MeToo requires us to see the ways that violence against Muslim American women is inseparable from imperialist political endeavors. I begin though with situating the conversation on sexual assault and harassment within Black feminist activism and theory as it both acknowledges the history of intersectional feminism and illuminates the ways that the conversation on #MeToo has been grossly limited.

Danielle McGuire, in her book *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance* (2010), writes about the long and impactful history of Black women fighting for their rights to live free of sexual assault and harassment. She chronicles the story of enslaved Harriet Jacobs in the 1830s, whose autobiographical accounts of sexual abuse at the hands of her oppressor served as a rallying call for abolishing slavery. This was a time when Black women were legally termed as "unrapeable" (Hartman 1997, Adeniji 2015). The perverse cultural and political mindset had a lasting impact on the prevalence of sexual assault of Black women, in particular by white men. In her book, McGuire recounts stories of the perpetual vulnerability of Black girls and women in the Jim Crow South and a prevalence of rape by white men without repercussions. Among other accounts, McGuire also tells the story of Recy Taylor, a 25-year-old Black woman, who was kidnapped and raped by six white men in Jim Crow Alabama in 1944. The men confessed but two different grand juries failed to indict them. Recy Taylor's case, led by NAACP's very own Rosa Parks, mobilized Black people across the nation, resulting in a national protest movement. Over time, nationwide mobilization against sexual abuse led to the bus boycotts of 1955–6, as buses served as the sites of sexual harassment and abuse for Black women who comprised the majority of bus users. McGuire not only lays out a case for Black women's activism against sexual assault as being central to civil rights for Black people in the United States, but she also argues, more recently (2018), that this particular historical fight is the rightful forerunner to the current #MeToo movement.

McGuire's particular contextualization helps us decenter the #MeToo movement within a different set of heroes than those who were initially highlighted within the mainstream discourse on #MeToo movement. For many in the United

States, the #MeToo movement begins with Alyssa Milano—a white Hollywood actress. In 2017, she tweeted asking women to respond with "me too" to give a sense of how pervasive sexual harassment and abuse was. It had an initial response of 1.7 million tweets from 85 countries (Park 2017). Soon thereafter, there was a corrective narrative offered that rightly credited Tarana Burke, an African American grassroots activist, with creating the idea of "me too" as a testament of solidarity among women who are victims of sexual assault. Tarana Burke had founded a nonprofit organization and named her movement Me Too a decade earlier than Milano's tweet. Burke's movement centered on empathy with fellow survivors and on providing resources to populations generally overlooked: girls and women of color from low wealth communities (JustBeInc). Nevertheless, the mainstream discourse post-Milano's tweet was dominated by stories of women like Angelina Jolie, Gwyneth Paltrow, Reese Witherspoon—high-earning white Hollywood actresses, or the downfall of prominent men like Matt Lauer, Bill O'Reilly, Roger Ailes, Louis CK, etc.—whose victims were mostly white women. Such a focus necessarily obscured the theorizing, experiences, and the activism of Black women from the general discussion about the #MeToo movement. The focus also revealed that the nature of this white-centered #MeToo movement that took off with Alyssa Milano was different from Tarana Burke's efforts to combat sexual harassment (Pilipchuk 2019a). Burke's main focus was and remains centered in the experiences of women of color, on their healing, such that victims of sexual assault can connect with one another within private settings. On the other hand, Hollywood's #MeToo and subsequent #TimesUp movements have devoted much of their attention to state-based punitive measures directed toward men in power and toward (public) disclosures (Pilipchuk 2019a). These concurrent and intersecting movements have had a successful uptake and within one year of the launch of #MeToo, it has been used about 19 million times on Twitter alone (Anderson and Toor 2018).

The point I wish to raise here is that a focus on #MeToo within Black women's stories of resistance and organizing highlights a unique set of issues separate from when the conversation is centered in whiteness. Such a focus does not take away from those stories that *have* received media coverage, but simply helps us view the movement from an intersectional lens. An intersectional lens acknowledges how systems of power are inseparably intermeshed together to marginalize and exclude the most vulnerable. The term "intersectionality" was introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1990). However, the idea has long-existed previously within Black feminist thought, as exemplified by Sojourner Truth's famous 1851 speech, "Ain't I a woman?" where she makes the argument that the oppression of Black women is more than the sum of oppression faced by women and by Blacks (Brezina 2005). As such, the Combahee River Collective's A Black Feminist Statement (1977) emphasizes that Black feminist politics must be simultaneously committed to eradicating racial, heteronormative, and class-based injustices.

Intersectionality recognizes that social markers such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation, disability, age, religion, etc., interact simultaneously within the social, political, and legal realm. The term signifies the idea that social markers such as race, sexual orientation, class, etc., cannot be examined in isolation or merely added together (Spelman 1988), rather that the impact of these social markers is intermeshed, and folks at vulnerable intersections of these markers face specific hurdles and exclusions, and hence may require different kinds of solutions (Collins 1990). Furthermore, the women at these vulnerable intersections belong to the category of women as much as anyone else within that category, and hence their concerns too fall under the umbrella of *women's issues* even when those issues are inseparable from issues of racism, homophobia, systemic poverty, etc. It is not the case that decentering whiteness means centering other marginalized communities, rather that any kind of "centering" inevitably marginalizes the most vulnerable within those "centered" communities. Conversely, an intersectional analysis yields a wider lens and more diverse avenues of liberation for all.

For example, Crenshaw, in her seminal piece on intersectionality argues that "when Black women were raped by white males, they were being raped not as women generally, but as Black women specifically: their femaleness made them sexually vulnerable to racist domination, while their Blackness effectively denied them any protection" (1989, 158–9). Furthermore, pervasive racism within our criminal justice system undermined the testimony of Black women when they did report their assault. Thus, rape of Black women cannot be examined simply as a function of patriarchy or of race, but rather as a function of both. A Brandeis University study (Kennedy 2003) found racial disparities in the treatment of sexual assault cases. In one locality, researchers found that when the victim was white, prosecutors filed charges in 75% of the cases; however, in cases where the victim was a Black woman, prosecutors filed charges just 34% of the time. A Department of Justice report revealed that Baltimore Police Department engaged in egregious behavior in dealing with cases of sexual assault that disproportionately harmed the Black community in particular (2016, 122–7). Police response to the victims of sexual assault included dismissing the assault altogether, mocking the victims, and in one case, asking the victim why she wanted to "mess up a guy's life" by reporting the assault. Again, examining sexual assault through a lens that is not tainted with white solipsism allows us to see the breadth of issues that women face, such as systemic and pervasive racism within the criminal justice system.

Similarly, when (mostly white) women set off a Twitter boycott to protest white actress Rose McGowan's ban from the platform—for possibly revealing a private phone number in one of her tweets amid her stand against sexual harassment and assault in Hollywood—women of color reacted differently to the boycott. Film director Ava DuVernay, who is a Black woman, noted that a "groundswell of solidarity" had never happened for women of color on Twitter, who routinely face

worse harassment than white women (Romano 2017). There is a visible lack of solidarity by white Twitter influencers toward Black women and online harassment against Black women is seen as "mere" trolling. A boycott of silence also did not resonate with many women of color since white women historically have had larger platforms to voice their concerns than women of color. Even within the context of #MeToo, white women victim stories were centerfold. For women of color to silence themselves when they already lack visibility to voice their own concerns did not make much sense. When we lack an intersectional lens, the dominantly-situated come up with strategies that work for white women (boycott of social media platform), but conduct themselves as if they are operating on behalf of all women.

A final example I present here to stress the significance of an intersectional lens as it pertains to the discourse on #MeToo is the issue of the sharp decline in the number of cases of sexual violence that were reported to authorities from South and Central American migrant communities. This decline corresponded with the election of President Donald Trump, whose harsh immigration stance resulted in a pervasive fear of deportation of friends and families within immigrant communities (Medina 2017). Furthermore, sexual harassment and assault of women within migrant labor communities is quite common (Speri 2018). In 2019, the Department of Justice revealed that there were "more than 4,500 complaints in four years about the sexual abuse of immigrant children who were being held at government-funded detention facilities" (Haag 2019). Thus, it is not simply the legitimate fear of ICE—the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement—that keeps migrant families from reporting sexual harassment and assault, but there is a pervasive problem of sexual assault at the hands of authorities themselves toward those detained. And without an intersectional lens, many fail to see the problem of ICE and the immoral detention and deportation of victims of sexual abuse as being inseparable from the discourse on #MeToo. Thus, the lack of an intersectional lens often obscures women's issues as "merely" issues of race, class, disability, religion, etc.

There is also the issue of *how* we tell our stories. Many women of color shape their stories into ways that the dominant white discourse can understand, sympathize, and identify with. Kristie Dotson terms this *testimonial smothering*, where a speaker may censor themselves when they anticipate that they will not be heard or given appropriate uptake; where they "insure that the testimony contains only content for which one's audience demonstrates testimonial competence" (2011, 244). This is to say that when we do tell our stories, we may only relay the aspects that we know will be comprehended within the dominant discourses.

Section Two: The Exotic Other

Here, I begin with the assumption that Muslim American women experience sexual harassment and assault within an environment that is unique to them. As explained above, this is because of the ways in which our particular set of circumstances map onto our social location, resulting in specific adverse impacts. At this point it must be noted that there is a significant overlap between the categories of Muslim and Black Americans. And the discrimination faced by Black Muslim American women cannot be subsumed under the category of Muslim American women's experiences any more than it can be subsumed under the category of Black American experiences of discrimination. Black Muslim Americans are the largest racial/ethnic category of Muslims in the United States, yet the issues they face are specific and dependent on a number of factors including one's social class, disability status, sexual orientation, etc. Thus, listening to our stories as Muslim women via an intersectional lens helps us in recognizing sexual assault and harassment in narratives that are not typically viewed as such.

I do worry that calling for recognition of *specific* concerns of Muslim American women may be received as affirming the notion that our experiences as a marginalized people are epistemically inaccessible. This is the flawed idea that Muslim women must be so different from "us" (where you can read "us" as white) that "we" cannot possibly understand them. This notion of inaccessibility is further exacerbated by the fact that so few non-Muslim Americans know a Muslim in real life (Pew 2014) or know much about the religion Islam (Pew 2010). What most people do know about Muslims and Islam, they know through the media, and much of that representation in the United States is negative (Ahmed and Matthes 2017). Thus, when we learn about the specific concerns Muslim American women face, it may lead to the opposite of the intended effect. Instead of recognizing the inclusion of Muslim American women's concerns as part and parcel of the category American women, it may actually increase the perceived distance. As it is, it is only in very rare cases that non-Muslims in the West begin to actually think about specific concerns of Muslim American women, concerns such as the value of familial relationships, notions of modesty within Islam, or conservative families shying away from sex education. But even in these rare cases, it is very easy for non-Muslim Westerners to translate these issues into faraway sounding essentialist accounts of what Muslims believe and do. This sense of exoticizing the experiences of Muslim women creates the false impression that Muslim communities are homogenous within themselves, that belonging to the category Muslim means that either we face these issues or have liberated ourselves and escaped our cultures. This completely erases the spectrum of our experiences and lived realities.

Such essentialist accounts also diminish the agency and humanity of Muslim women in exchange for supposedly recognizing our (Muslim women's) specific concerns. It may also make one think that they do not have much in common with

that exotic *other* "backward" culture. Much to the contrary, many of the issues that Muslim American women face within their own communities are not unique to Muslim Americans and are of course not true for all Muslim Americans. In fact, there are commonalities of experiences for almost all the issues that cut across Muslim and non-Muslim communities in the West. For example, there are many Midwestern white rural cultures, or Black cultures, or immigrant cultures, where familial ties are an inescapable entrenched value. Similarly, condemnation via shame within a religious context is something that often occurs within Christian, Judaic, Hindu, etc., communities as well. Recognizing these experiential commonalities allows us to not only acknowledge Muslim women's humanity by creating empathy for our shared plights, but it also pushes back on exoticizing our predicament as arising solely from a static and immutable "Islamic culture." Thus, it is important to note the specificity of experiences as unique and yet acknowledge the commonalities of experiences between Muslim American communities and other American communities. More importantly, we ought to recognize the multitude of cultural and religious attitudes that are context dependent, and that even within a singular geographical Muslim community, there is a heterogeneity of epistemic communities. This paper does not deal with issues that Muslim women face within their own communities (an important conversation which I deal with elsewhere [where?]), instead I explore what it would mean to have an inclusive conversation.

The next section deploys an intersectional lens to contextualize the act of violently having one's hijab pulled off as an instance of sexual assault and section four highlights the dangers of speaking for others, especially in ways that attribute sexual violence experienced by Muslim women to their cultures and/or their men. I argue that acknowledging these dangers is in itself a crucial part of an inclusive #MeToo conversation.

Section Three: Hijab Snatching as Sexual Assault

> Carrigg walked past the 25-year-old woman and did not say anything when he pulled on her hijab at The Farm on Elm Street, according to police. *They say the incident caused discomfort to the woman's chin and head.* (Forchheimer 2018, emphasis mine)

The way that the act of hijab snatching is reported in media often illustrates the lack of understanding of what the hijab means to its wearers and how hijab snatching is actually experienced. For example, the description makes this act sound akin to a mosquito bite ("discomfort"! to a small part of the body). It fails to capture the violence as experienced by Muslims and reduces the action to a clinical description, devoid of any context of racialization, patriarchy, and norms of nakedness. In this part of the paper, I make two distinct points to argue that hijab snatching, a particular kind of Islamophobic violence against Muslim women within the Western

context, is a form of sexual assault. Firstly, the act of hijab snatching is often meant to humiliate the victim of the assault within a racialized and gendered context. Secondly, the act itself transgresses the norms of nakedness in many contexts.

Let me begin with the first point that hijab snatchings have to be examined from within racialized and gendered frameworks. It has been documented that women visibly marked out as "Muslim"—through their skin color, hair, dress, accent, etc.—experience Islamophobic encounters at twice the rate as Muslim men, and women who wear hijabs[1] experience them even more so (Cainkar 2009). Cainkar, in her book, *Homeland Insecurity: The Arab American and Muslim American Experience after 9/11*, argues that Muslim men are typically seen as security threats—jailed or deported after minor violations, whereas Muslim women are seen as a cultural threat to all-American values.

Sidrah Ahmad (2019) conducted empirical qualitative research of Islamophobic violence against Canadian women, finding that many Muslim Canadian women were targeted because of the "impact of gendered Islamophobic discourses that construct Muslim women as being passive, weak and oppressed—and therefore as "acceptable targets" for violence" (45). Muslim women are often more easily identifiable via arbitrary markers and the Islamophobia they face *is* gendered. Some of the examples that Ahmad documents include: yelling at Muslim women to go back to where they came from, men pulling off women's hijabs, punching them in the face, vehicular assault, sexual assault, rape, and intimate partner violence within inter-faith relationships. In another study conducted on young Muslim American women's experiences of Islamophobia, Sabrina Alimahomed-Wilson documents that "85 percent [of her subjects] reported experiencing verbal assaults or threats within public spaces, and 25 percent reported experiencing physical violence" (2017, 73) primarily at the hands of white American men. She argues:

> that the ideology of "saving Muslim women" from violence only applies when (foreign) Muslim men are positioned as the assailants of such violence. That is, Muslim women's experiences of institutionalized private violence in the U.S. homeland positions the people enacting such violence as invisible subjects, thus individualizing cases of violence against Muslim American women as isolated incidents. White American masculinity—the convergence of dominant racial-gender statuses—relegates the assailants of institutionalized private violence against Muslim women as simultaneously raceless and genderless. (91)

This is all to say that the gendered and racialized violence against Muslim women is common but it is not viewed via an intersectional lens that recognizes racial and gender dynamics at play—when that violence is precisely a function of the women's specific social location.

Even the choice to wear a hijab itself is seen as evidence of Muslim women not belonging, being irrational, and/or lacking agency. Alia Al-Saji argues that the veiled woman is naturalized within the Western imagination as being gender-oppressed

and deficient in an ability to make any truly conscientious choices for herself. This in effect provides the negative mirror that Western feminism needs to see itself as free. More importantly, the discrimination based on such flawed imagination maintains the exclusion of veiled Muslim women within the social and political domain (Al-Saji 2010). For Falguni Sheth, the hijab is seen as an "unruly" symbol that "must be managed, tamed, or ousted from the polity" (2009, 98). Sheth argues that the Muslim woman is seen as in need of discipline because she defies reasonableness by doing something as "irrational" as donning a garment that supposedly further limits her freedom. This sense of being uncomfortable with an incomprehensible aberration within the Western imagination is what underlies nationalist toxic masculinity. It is within such a context that harassment such as forcefully pulling off a hijab is an instance of sexual assault. When a perpetrator attempts to pull off a woman's hijab, it is often done precisely to assert racial and gender dominance in society, to assert their right to be full of rage at her mere presence in public space (their space), and to assert her place as an irrational inferior outsider. The action is meant to humiliate her, to "put her in her place" within the hierarchal racialized gendered dynamic within which Muslim women exist.

Secondly, hijab snatchings transgress norms of nakedness in many contexts. To understand this, we have to examine how Muslim women themselves experience the hijab. Not all Muslim women wear the hijab, but those that do, do so for multifarious reasons. They may wear it as a sign of political defiance in the face of an Islamophobic environment, as a religious or cultural identifier, as protection from the environment, as a possible safeguard against harassment, and/or as a religious commitment to God. Saba Mahmood, in her book *Politics of Piety* (2011), argues that when asked about why they wear a veil, many Muslim (Egyptian) women position their response within the framework of the Islamic virtue of modesty, as a means of acquiring piety (closeness to God). For them, veiling "both expresses 'true modesty' and is the means through which modesty is acquired" (23).

For women who wear the hijab for reasons of modesty, it is an integral part of how they view themselves as clothed versus naked. Talia Mae Bettcher writes about what constitutes nakedness and about the violation of the self. She argues that it is tricky to define what constitutes nakedness as it differs in various contexts. For example, the boundaries of what would be considered naked is vastly different within aboriginal versus European cultures. She acknowledges that she writes from within a Eurocentric culture herself, where the idea of nakedness is heavily imbued with moral meaning. And this moral meaning does not exist in a vacuum or in isolation, rather these "'moral boundaries . . . have two sides: one regulating the subject of perceptual access, one regulating the object)" (2012, 323). For Bettcher, while the material boundary of what constitutes nakedness exists on the body itself (i.e. what is physically covered by clothes versus what is not), the moral boundary (and hence moral meaning) exists between people. That is to

say, the boundaries are "interpersonal boundaries that draw moral lines between people" (323). As mentioned before, for many women, the hijab is not a fashion accessory, rather an integral part of how they see themselves as clothed, forming the moral boundary of nakedness for them. Within contexts where the hijab is experienced by the veil-wearer as part of her sense of being covered (as opposed to being naked), and/or where the act of wearing a veil is commonly seen as an irrational act that the woman partakes in in order to supposedly guard her modesty, then any violation of this clothing garment ought to be understood within that interpersonal context. For some Muslim women, when others see them without a hijab, the women experience their bodies as (partly) naked, morally transgressed. It is how they negotiate the moral boundaries of what nakedness means within the world they occupy. As Jennifer Hyatt, a hijab-wearing Muslim, describes her experience in being in custody of Ventura County Sheriff's Office in Illinois:

> I was spoken to like I was trash and deserved everything that was happening to me while in custody. My hijab was yanked off my head in front of many men despite my continued requests to wear it. *I felt naked and humiliated* the entire duration of my custody. (Mejia 2018, emphasis mine)

For Ms. Hyatt, it was crucial that she keep her hijab on in front of other men in order experience her body as clothed. Thus, when this garment is violently pulled off a Muslim woman's head, many may experience it as an act to sexually humiliate her by exposing what she wants to be kept clothed.

These two considerations: 1). the inseparable racialized and gendered hierarchy that Muslim women exist in; and 2). the norms of nakedness and moral transgression that surround the discourse on Muslim women—contextualize hijab snatching within the appropriate circumstances in which it exists. One important way to acknowledge such an act is within the umbrella of the #MeToo movement but this can only occur when we recognize that "individual women's interests are harmed by oppressive structures besides sexism—such as the imperialism, unrestricted capitalism, and white supremacy in which Western feminists are implicated, but also by heterosexism, ableism, cissexism, and other axes of oppression" (Khader 2018, 6). This is to say that we must have an intersectional lens that necessarily considers the many oppressive structures that we exist within in order to examine issues of sexual assault and harassment. In the following section, I expand on this implication and examine what it means to have an inclusive conversation about #MeToo in the context of Muslim women.

Section Four: Making Space for our Stories

In February 2018, Mona Eltahawy shared her account of being sexually assaulted in Makkah, the holiest site for Muslims, and encouraged other women to share

their stories with the hashtag #MosqueMeToo. The hashtag signified some of the stories of Muslim women who have been groped, pinched, and assaulted in the Holy Mosque in Makkah and other religious spaces. Eltahawy received a backlash from many Muslims for airing her marginalized community's dirty laundry in an already-Islamophobic Western public environment. She wrote about how Muslim women, much like many minorities, are "caught between a rock and a hard place" (2017). According to her, if we voice our concerns, they are coopted by right-wing conservatives to justify their hatred for Islam and Muslims. On the other hand, some in Muslim communities themselves portray the victims as women with ulterior political/social motives. And when Muslim women are not loud about our issues within the community, our voices get buried by the concerns of the larger Muslim community for the welfare of the accused and the reputation of the community at large. Eltahawy urges us not to give into the fear of right-wing concerns within the West, stressing that we should not keep silent about our abuse. Many Muslim women across the globe responded to Eltahawy and tweeted their own experiences of harassment within religious spaces (Gharib 2018).

In this section, I examine the kinds of voices and narratives that get uptake within the larger discourse on #MeToo often under the guise of inclusivity. Eltahawy's contribution to the worldwide #MeToo movement is invaluable and has received a decent amount of coverage within the American media—as it should. Eltahawy wrote op-ed pieces for *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and was featured in an interview with *Time* magazine. However, Eltahawy's efforts received uptake in part because, firstly, it fit the narrative where violence on Muslim women is a function of Muslim men and cultures. Secondly, the #MosqueMeToo narrative also fit into the broader mainstream movement's form where conversations on #MeToo are an intra-community analysis of violence within minority communities. Such narratives typically avoid any analysis of hierarchal dynamics that involve axis of identities that cut across women as a category, such as race, socioeconomics status, disability, religion, etc., and any issues of complicity for those dominantly situated. While the #MosqueMeToo movement is a crucial step to having an inclusive conversation, it simultaneously occupies the form that is not only coopted by the hateful rhetoric of the Islamophobic right, but also by the well-intentioned liberal feminists with much bigger platforms than women of color.

Serene Khader, in her book *Decolonizing Universalism* (2018), introduces the apt term "missionary feminism," a thread of feminism where, in part, particular feminists assume that the adoption of Western liberal values would lead to a gender-just society, all the while ignoring the role of imperialist intervention in the oppression of other women. While it is true that liberal feminists write about *other* cultures and religious practices with the best of intentions, they are often viewed as the better (best?) option than the clearly Islamophobic folks who blatantly incite hatred against Muslims. They are awarded undeserved credibility as experts on

Muslim affairs as they "champion" Muslim women's rights by demonizing Muslim cultures. As Sherene Razack points out:

> The body of the Muslim woman, a body fixed in the Western imaginary as confined, mutilated, and sometimes murdered in the name of culture, serves to reinforce the threat that the Muslim man is said to pose to the West and is used to justify the extraordinary measures of violence and surveillance required to discipline him and Muslim communities. (2004, 130)

This is to say that this hyper-focus on sensationalizing the violence against Muslim women at the hands of their men and culture serves to protect imperialistic projects of the West in the Muslim world.

Within the context of gender violence and sexual harassment of Muslim women, it becomes very difficult to push back on or reject liberal feminists. This is because there are genuine commonalities within all of our experiences and our struggles, and there exist strong grassroots-level alliances within inclusive communities. The problem arises when instead of seeing those commonalities between communities, our role within each other's narratives, and our function within the power dynamics that impact the more vulnerable, some view the *other* (in this case, Muslim women) as subordinate via the lens of cultural practice.

A famous example from the discipline of philosophy is the well-intended piece by Susan Moller Okin (1999) where she argues that there are some minority cultures that have unquestionably harmful practices toward women, and such practices should not be tolerated in the name of multiculturalism in liberal states. That piece received a lot of uptake both within feminist theory and larger academic circles, and it inadvertently set up a dichotomy between liberal values and illiberal *others*. Okin's characterization of illiberal *others* erased both the heterogeneous nature of the *other* and the dissident voices within. Furthermore, Miranda Pilipchuk (2019b) argues that American discourses on gender violence, for most part, frame the violence as a problem of the *other* by utilizing racial and ethnic stereotypes.

Even within the United States, the actions of sexual predators who are men of color are contextualized within their culture and religious practices. The same is not the case for white men (Pilipchuk 2019b). Domestic violence, which is quite prevalent in the United States (Black et. el. 2011), is generally not explained as a function of white American culture or as a function of historically Christian traditions. Similarly, a high prevalence of sexual assault across US campuses (Mellins 2017) is not seen as a function of American youth culture. However, when it comes to communities of color, our stories are reported in ways which makes a caricature out of our "backward," "uncivilized" culture and orthodox religion. Saba Mahmood (2009) writes that:

> Despite these parallel statistics, discussions of "honor killing" are seldom analyzed within a comparative context. Instead, most discussions construct "honor killing"

> as symptomatic of "Islamic culture" (note the elision between religion and culture in this formulation), while acts of man-on-woman homicide in the United States are presented either as acts of individualized pathology or excessive passion. In this logic, American men are represented as acting out of jealousy (a "natural" emotion) against their sexual rivals (albeit swept away by its force), while Muslim men are understood to be compelled by "their culture," irrationally and blindly acting out its misogynist customs and traditions. An individualized account of domestic violence in the West is secured, in other words, against a tautological account of "Islamic culture." (Mahmood 203–4)

Here, Mahmood helps us understand why hijab snatching is not understood as a form of sexual harassment as it would necessarily bring attention to the pervasive values of white supremacy in this country. Yet the very same logic is applied to minorities, demonizing heterogenous cultures and peoples to yet again maintain white supremacy. Razack brings out the dangers of such evasive maneuvering, as"'culturalising' violence against women as an attribute of Muslim peoples and using the opportunity to justify a number of initiatives . . . have to do more with teaching 'them' how to behave than it does any meaningful anti-violence objective" (2004, 131).

This is all to say that the repercussions of being *spoken for* within #MeToo conversations are quite dangerous. The caricature of Muslim men as patriarchal and oppressive is used to justify foreign policy of bringing "democracy" through utter destruction, whilst bringing about the "liberation" of Muslim women and girls through torturing and killing of their men and boys.

Beyond the worry of being spoken for, I also must bring light to the issue of how my own voice may be read in what may seem like the best-case scenario. I worry about the gravity or trust that will be attributed to my voice. Given this departure point where xenophobia "others" us and where Islamophobia contributes to our sexual harassment, I worry what the reader may take away from a frank discussion of the processes through which Muslim women mediate their struggles within their own religious and cultural communities. This is especially worrisome because of the gravity or trust that will be attributed to my voice as a Muslim woman.

I am an "insider" by Susan Okin's defining terminology. She writes: "It seems that some of the best feminist social critics are "inside-outside critics'; that is, persons from within a culture who at some point in life have experience outside of that culture that makes them critical of at least some of its practices" (2000, 40). But this assumes that while insiders gain a critical perspective via distance *from* their home cultures, they gain it also via proximity *toward* another—presumably Western culture (Abu-Lughod 2002, 789; Khader 2018, 23). This is not necessarily the case since there are plenty of examples of dissidents and rabble rousers who are inseparable and thriving within the organisms we call culture. To claim that the best feminist critics are those who at some point had distanced themselves from their home cultures, again, buys into the idea that it is the Western manifestation

of feminist ideals that will liberate *all* women, in particular those who are in need of saving by Western feminists.

Can we ever tell our stories in a way that represents us? When well-intentioned non-Muslim Americans read anything about our worlds, especially when it comports well with their pre-existing worldview of "primitive and uncivilized" Muslim lives, they eagerly consume it all in the name of being more informed. Any uptake we receive from the outside is often taken up for the wrong reasons. This is the power of tokenism where too much credibility is accorded to "native" voices that fit pre-existing narratives of brown women liberating themselves from their traditions. So, who can tell our stories? Can only Muslim women tell Muslim women's stories, and who will be the gatekeeper of who counts as a Muslim? (Fatima 2011). This conversation must allow for the recognition of the researcher's positionality within the narratives of those for whom they speak. As Linda Alcoff argues, "not only is location epistemically salient, but certain privileged locations are discursively dangerous" (1991, 7) as our social location and context work in tandem with structures of oppression. And as noted before, it is also important to keep reminding ourselves that there is a multiplicity of Muslim American cultures and epistemic norms thriving within any one space. So, although it is crucial for us to talk about the many processes by which sexual harassment and abuse is mediated *within* the Muslim community, we cannot begin there because that would ignore the specific location that Muslim women find themselves navigating from within, where we are often spoken for and only represented by those dominantly socially located or by "native' voices that fit particular narratives. This paper serves as that starting point then to have conversations on sexual assault and harassment that recognize the specific hurdles that Muslim women face in the United States.

Section Five: Whereto Next?

A well-intentioned white feminist friend continually posts on her social media stories about women from the Global South, particularly Muslim women, being misogynistically subjugated by their culture or their men. For example, she has posted reports about some Pakistani woman being lashed by village elders for "adultery"/rape, or a Sudanese woman beaten to death by her family for not agreeing to marry someone they picked, or a Bangladeshi woman killed for reporting her rape, etc. I truly think that my friend means to use her privilege to bring much-needed light to these sorts of events. However, often her posts have rubbed me the wrong way, and learning about various harms of "missionary" feminism made me realize why. The stories are couched within a Western framework of what liberation entails, whilst creating a dichotomy that separates *those* women and *their* cultures from the freedoms granted to women in the West. My friend's postings almost never have any commentary from herself or from women of color, but are simply links from Western

media outlets, like *BBC*, *The Intercept*, *The Guardian*, *CNN*, etc., generally written by other Westerners, with sensational headlines that seem to reinforce the narrative that Muslim women are merely a subject of their patriarchal cultures and/or men.

It is important that when we focus on #MeToo, we also have a discussion on what inclusivity entails: whose stories get told, on which platforms, who gets uptake, who speaks for whom, the social and political structures we consider part of the fight against sexual harassment and assault, etc. Without such an analysis, reach outs from Western feminists to help Muslim women would not only appear to operate in bad faith, but as argued in this paper, end up having an adverse impact. This groundwork is a crucial pre-conversation to any real discussion about sexual harassment and assault in the case of Muslim American women and other marginalized identities.

I argue that a more inclusive lens that takes into the account the lives of *othered* women needs to give more voice to those women, not by feeding into neo-liberal feminist agendas of imperialism about their oppression at the hands of their *othered* cultures, but by actually seeing what one's own place is in this narrative of violence. Ultimately, we need to broaden our lens of what we see as part of the #MeToo movement.

Notes

1. While hijab commonly refers to the style of hair covering worn in the West by Western Muslims, I will use the word hijab here to refer to all sorts of veiling practices that cover specifically the hair, including the *chaddor* and *shayla*. I do not use the word hijab to refer to styles of veiling that cover the face as well, such as the *niqab*.

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